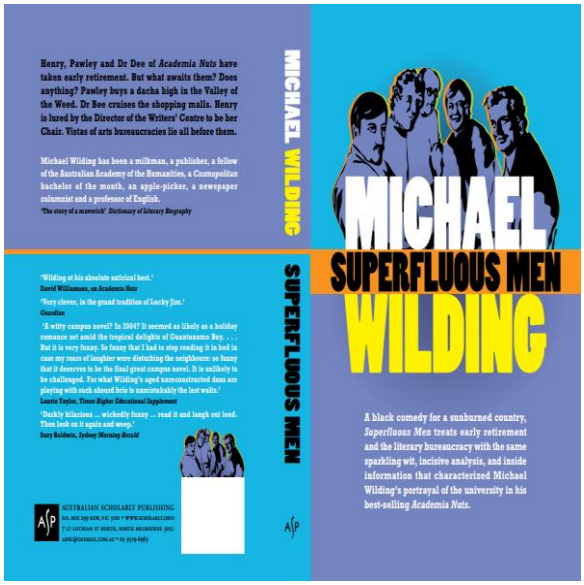
Henry, Pawley and Dr Dee of *Academia Nuts* have taken early retirement. But what awaits them? Does anything? Pawley buys a dacha high in the Valley of the Weed. Dr Bee cruises the shopping malls. Henry is lured by the Director of the Writers' Centre to be her Chair. Vistas of arts bureaucracies lie all before them.
Michael Wilding has been a milkman, a publisher, a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, a Cosmopolitan bachelor of the month, an apple-picker, a newspaper columnist and a professor of English.
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A black comedy for a sunburned country, *Superfluous Men* treats early retirement and the literary bureaucracy with the same sparkling wit, incisive analysis, and inside information that characterized Michael Wilding's portrayal of the university in his best-selling *Academia Nuts*.

Superfluous Men

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SUPERFLUOUS MEN

MICHAEL WILDING

Press On / Arcadia

Melbourne

Superfluous Men
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To Irina Dunn

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1: Superfluous Men

The Writers' Centre called.

'Henry Lancaster!' said the Director. 'Where have you been all these years?'

'In prison,' he said gloomily.

'In prison?' she said. 'I never saw you there? Why didn't you come to the creative writing class I ran?'

I know how to write, he was about to say. But why be surly? Why the automatic reflex? Because of those years in the mind prison.

'The mind prison,' he said.

'The what?'

'The university.'

She laughed.

'Oh that,' she said. 'Very droll. So where are you now?'

'I have been released,' he said. How could he say, 'I am retired. I am free. I am aimless. I am lost. I am superfluous man'?

'So you're retired,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Free.'

'Yes.'

'Aimless, lost, superfluous.'

'Well -'

'I've got just the job for you,' she said.

'Job?' he said. He didn't want a job. He didn't want to be aimless but he certainly didn't want a job.

'A hobby for your declining years.'

'I'm not that derelict.'

The one thing he refused to list in *Who's Who* was hobbies.

'Of course not. That's why I'm calling you,' she cooed. All charm. 'Why don't you join the Writers' Centre? Come onto the committee. I need a decent chair.'

'Well,' he said.

'You'll have to think about it.'

'Well, yes.'

'Think about it,' she said. 'But not for too long. I may have to get the voting papers out.'

'Voting?' he said, dubiously.

'In the event that there has to be an election.'

'I don't know about that,' he said. 'What if I don't get elected?'

'Don't worry about that.'

'Oh well,' said Henry, 'if you can fix it.'

'Of course,' she said.

'No public humiliation?'

'Only if you want it,' she said.

'No,' said Henry, 'I've had quite enough of that on campus.'

'Done, then,' she said.

And it was.

Henry sat in the Golden Bowl and complained at his neglect by the university now he had taken early retirement.

'A relief, I would have thought,' said Pawley. 'Last thing I want is the university messing with my life now I'm out of there.'

Pawley had gone too. Taken the package, as the administrators called it.

'But it's not how I expected it,' said Henry. 'I expected reverence, privilege, giving the occasional address, a reading, a master-class. . . .'

'You hated teaching.'

'Not hated, exactly. Anyway, it needn't have involved teaching.'

'A commissioned portrait, maybe,' suggested Dr Bee who had left before both of them, hadn't even waited for the package.

'Well, yes.'

'His conceit knows no bounds,' said Dr Bee. 'I'm surprised you didn't suggest they kept your room unchanged as a memorial. Like John Lennon's semi. With your books ranged round the wall.'

'I thought of it,' said Henry. 'But they laughed.'

'As well they might.'

'They said they were short of space. How can they be short of space if everyone retires and no one replaces them?'

'Administrators,' said Pawley. 'They take on more administrators.'

'Even an invitation to talk to the Friends of the Library -'

'To promote your new book.'

Yes,' said Henry. 'You'd think they could have done that.'

'You told the librarian it was absurd to imagine his institution should ever expect to have friends, given his policy of fining academic staff for overdue books.'

'A degree day address, then.'

'As I recall it, you told me you never went to receive your own degree.'

'I was out of the country.'

'And your doctorate of letters?'

'Senate said I could wait till April for a degree day ceremony or get it awarded straight away in February. I thought it safest to get it awarded straight away. Before the academic year started. Didn't want someone hearing about it and objecting. Getting up an inquiry.'

'This was on Pawley's advice, I imagine,' said Dr Bee.

'Can't be too careful,' said Pawley.

'Who would get up an inquiry?' Dr Bee asked.

'Oh, some enemy. Someone with a personal grudge or ideological obsession. Envy, Resentment.'

'Politics,' said Pawley, 'security, *La Police des Ecrivains*.'

'I figured once they'd awarded it they couldn't take it back.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Pawley.

'Anyway,' said Henry, 'I figured the sooner the better.'

'Get it while you can,' said Dr Bee.

'Your motto, indeed,' said Henry.

‘For the sexual life, yes,’ Dr Bee agreed.

'It still doesn't alter the fact that you've never been to a degree day ceremony, your own or anyone else's,' Pawley persisted.

'No,' Henry agreed. 'Waste of time.'

'Exactly. As you've often said.'

'It's the truth.'

'But why would you think they'd invite you to something they know you disdain?'

'I don't know about disdain.'

'Something you've publicly condemned. Frequently.'

'I didn't think they'd be so petty-minded,' said Henry.

'You really believe that, don't you Henry,' Dr Bee sighed.

'You never thought about them at all,' said Pawley. 'It's only now when your vanity's at stake, when your need for public exposure, for standing up and holding forth, becomes unbearable. Your lifeblood. Spend a lifetime lecturing people, you get withdrawals when you're suddenly not doing it.'

'Did you?' Henry asked. He began to see in Pawley a sympathetic fellow sufferer.

'Not from that,' said Pawley. 'Wasn't doing too much teaching at the end. The Dead Hand didn't trust me.'

'Lucky you.'

'It was his way of punishing me.'

'Now they punish you by giving you twelve first-year tutorials a week,' said Henry. 'It was the thought of that that drove me out.'

'And now you're complaining that they don't ask you back.'

'Not so much complaining,' said Henry, 'as lamenting. Lamenting. I think that best describes it.'

'It's your institutionalised personality,' said Pawley. 'Fear of freedom. You need to find another institution.'

'At least they still give me e-mail.'

'Every communication instantly accessible to the university,' said Pawley. 'No firewalls. No privacy. Anyone can hack into it. And they do.'

'Who does?'

'University security for a start, I would imagine,' said Pawley.

'So what do you suggest?' said Henry.

'Get another server. Make a break from all the spy-ware installed in the university system.'

'How do you know there's spy-ware?'

'There'd have to be. Campus police. Commercial espionage for medical research. Political espionage for peace studies. Terrorist espionage for Middle Eastern studies. Economic espionage. Everyone would have a reason for wanting a piece of the action.'

Henry grunted. He didn't want to know. His last and only connection with the place where he'd spent his best years.

'Cut the umbilical cord, Henry,' Pawley said.

After lunch Henry drove to the Writers' Centre. As he approached he realized that the Director's phone call had raised his spirits. The clouds had lifted. The sky was cerulean blue, clear, unimpaired. The gauze of pollution had been swept away and everything shone with hope and vigour. The bottlebrushes bloomed bright crimson, the gum leaves shimmered in the morning sun, even the traffic seemed light and free-flowing.

A sign announced Writers' Centre and he turned into the grounds, through the convict-hewn stone pillars and the massive iron gates. Palm trees lined the driveway like an entry into the new Jerusalem. As he drove in deeper, parts began to look like a war-torn recipient of imposed democracy and human rights, cottages with their roofs caved-in, buildings with smashed doors, boarded up windows.

Originally these had been the grounds of the old asylum. The lunatic asylum, not a refuge for refugees. These days they kept refugees offshore. And not that you could call it an asylum these days or mention lunatics. Mental hospital, perhaps, though even that was uncertain. Psychiatric something or other. Clinic or research facility or whatever as the decades had passed had been perceived as the best way of masking its function under some bland bureaucratic-speak, politically correct and non-discriminatory label.

More than one poet had been incarcerated here. Many a lobotomy and leucotomy had been performed on the recalcitrant. In the Cold War years it had been rumoured that experiments had been conducted with LSD and other more exotic psychotropic substances. Experiments for who or what it had never been revealed. Pawley had claimed on good though undisclosed authority that these were projects funded by the CIA and the Defence Department. He cited Timothy Leary's early researches in the States, funded by the U. S. Navy. But Pawley was always liable to claim that sort of thing and his undisclosed authorities were never less than dubious. Didn't mean they didn't have it right, though.

And then the great revolution in psychiatric care had arrived and the patients were kicked out onto the streets and dosed up with lithium and largactil and other wonder products of the booming global drug industry and staffing costs dramatically reduced. The former inmates could be seen shuffling aimlessly round the streets of the inner city, crawling back into their half-way

houses in the twilight, while the grounds fell silent and the buildings fell into decay and the government worked on ways to sell off the valuable real estate covertly. It had already begun selling off schools. Now it was greedy for more and was targeting hospitals. Why didn't they simply sell off parliament house? That really was prime real estate. Maybe he should suggest it.

He shook off such depressing thoughts. They had never done Pawley any good, so why should he entertain them? Think positive, he told himself, a role in life, a community function, recognition, responsibility and the warm feeling of being wanted.

The Director greeted him, all power suit and smiles.

'Henry! You made it!'

'I did indeed.'

'Let me show you round,' she said.

A shaven-headed, ear-ringed Caucasian male in his early thirties looked up at them over the top of his computer.

'Meet our office manager,' she said.

'Henry Lancaster,' Henry introduced himself, reaching out a hand.

'The Criminal,' said the office manager, not taking it, the hand.

The Director laughed mellifluously. Though was there a note of quiet desperation beneath it? Perhaps not. Perhaps it was quiet satisfaction.

'He's on day release from jail,' she said.

'Ah,' said Henry.

'You can call me Crim for short,' said the Criminal, 'but hopefully not for long.'

'Not for long?' Henry asked.

'He's up for parole.'

'Ah, excellent,' said Henry. 'What are you, ah, in for?'

'You wouldn't want to know,' said the Criminal. 'Best you don't.'

'Right,' said Henry.

It was no doubt a denial of his human rights to call him the Criminal. But it was what he insisted on. That way no one would imagine he worked there of his own free will.

'OK?' the Criminal asked.

'Yes, carry on,' said the Director.

He turned back to his work station.

'So what's his crime?' Henry asked as they toured the building.

'That's classified.'

'Classified?'

'Confidential.'

'Why?'

'To avoid prejudice.'

'Fair enough,' said Henry. 'I suppose.'

The Director indicated various doors, all of them closed. Writers' studios. Function rooms. No sound came from behind them.

'Is he dangerous?'

'No.'

'Sure?'

'Not to you, anyway,' she said.

'What does that mean?'

'It means you don't need to worry.'

'But I do worry,' Henry said. 'Does he steal things? Set fire to things? Kill people?'

She laughed.

'Where does he come from?'

'Jail,' she said, 'like he told you. He was in my writing class there. I spotted him.'

'Or he spotted you.'

She beamed. 'You think so?'

'How could he not?'

The beam faltered momentarily, briefly dropping into a frown, but she passed on rapidly.

'And how does he come to be here?'

'Community service. Day release. Job retraining.'

'Rehabilitation?' Henry asked. 'You believe in good deeds?'

'I believe in cheap labour,' she said. 'It saves us a fortune, Henry. We'd be paying out thousands of dollars in wages if we didn't have him.'

'So this is like one of those prison factories in China. Or an Alabama chain gang.'

'Something like that,' she agreed.

She took him down to the cellar. A musty smell of old stone and damp and fungus and decay hung there. Iron loops protruded from the walls. Who knew what function they had served? But Henry had his suspicions. He could imagine recalcitrant inmates chained there.

'You're sure he's safe? I'd hate to get hit on the head by him down here. Have my wallet stolen. My car keys pinched, hear him drive away. . . .'

'What an imagination you have, Henry,' the Director said. 'Anyone could tell that you're a successful novelist.'

'You reckon?' said Henry. It was the successful bit that got to him. As she knew it would.

'Of course. That's why I want you on the committee.'

'Ah, well,' he said, getting up the steps and out of the cellar as fast as he could. 'Ah, well. One tries.'

'One does indeed,' she said. 'And succeeds.'

No doubt about that. She had spotted Henry like she had spotted the Criminal and hooked them both.

'Now what can I get you to drink?' she asked. 'Beer? Orange juice? Wine? Tea? Coffee?'

'A glass of wine might be nice'.

'White? Red?'

'White.'

'Chilled?'

'Well, yes.'

'Take a seat on the veranda,' she said, 'and I'll bring it out to you.'

He took a seat, such as it was, weather-stained and rusted. But it seemed stable enough. Certainly no less stable than his former chair at university. He sat there and looked at the grounds stretching before him. The mown lawns. The splendid trees.

Nobody came. Nobody went. It was like an open air production of *Waiting for Godot*.

Nothing but the rustling of a light zephyr through the leaves.

And the Director bearing a chilled white wine and two glasses.

'This is rather jolly,' said Henry. 'I think I could take to this.'

'I knew you would,' she said.

'Does he have a name? Henry asked.

'Who?'

'The Criminal.'

'I imagine so.'

'But you don't know what it is?'

'Privacy,' she said.

'Privacy?'

'A matter of not infringing his human rights. And those of his victims.'

'Victims?' said Henry.

'Well, if you knew his name you could probably track down who they were.'

'Victims?' Henry heard himself say again. 'What did he do to them?'

'Oh, nothing much,' she said. 'I think.'

'You think. Don't you know?'

'It's all on a need-to-know basis, Henry. Don't worry about it. Here, have another drink.'

She topped up his glass and offered him a cigarette.

'You smoke?'

'Not anymore.'

All the things he had had to give up.

She lit one for herself.

'I'll just have this, then I have to get back to the desk. Can't smoke in there. Health and safety.'

'What about the rest of the staff?'

'The rest?'

'Are there any?'

'The volunteers,' she said.

'What do they do?'

'Not a lot. Lick envelopes. Answer the phone. Seize up the computers.'

'So there's no one permanent?'

'The job's advertised,' she said. 'Maybe you would like to do the interviews.'

'I'm not sure that's my sort of thing.'

'You never know,' she said. 'You might enjoy it.'

Henry grunted

'So you'll come on board?'

'Well,' said Henry. 'You mentioned something about elections.'

It had nagged at him as soon as she had mentioned them. That old familiar tug of alarm. Was he expected to canvas for support? It was like being sent by his publisher to book signings in bookshops in remote communities and having to sit at the counter in abject humiliation as no one turned up. At least, not to buy. Just to gaze at his humiliation there, in the pillory. While the publisher sucked in funding from some Regional Development scam.

'Elections?' she said, in some surprise. 'Not if I can help it.'

'Good,' he said.

'If no more people nominate than there are places on the committee, we don't have to have an election.'

'I see,' said Henry. 'Is that how it's fixed?'

'It's not a matter of fixing it,' she said sternly. 'It's a matter of economy. We run this place on a shoestring, Henry. Volunteers.'

'Criminals.'

'Exactly. If we have to have an election we have to mail out forms to all the members. Printing. Postage. Envelopes. Time. And all for what?'

'Democracy?' Henry ventured.

'Exactly. So as long as only the right number nominate, we're fine.'

'And how does one nominate?'

'You fill in this form here,' she said, handing it across to him.

'I don't have a pen.'

She handed him her Parker special, engraved with the Centre's logo.

'You're a writer and you don't have a pen?' she said.

'Writers never have pens.'

'Is that so?'

'In my observation,' said Henry.

'Ah well, we'll have to get you one. Just sign your name there.'

'What about the rest of it?

'What rest of it?'

'It says proposer and seconder.'

'I'll look after that.'

'And is that all?'

'That's all,' she said. 'Unless you want to help out in the office while you're here.'

'Don't think I can manage that today.'

'Or any other day.'

'I might,' he said. 'One day.'

Life might be continuing after all.

2: Pawley Joins Up

'Come out and see the place,' said Henry as they finished lunch.

'The madhouse?' said Dr Bee.

'We don't use terms like that,' said Henry.

'I do,' said Dr Bee.

'If the cat doesn't get your tongue, political correctness will,' said Pawley. Old proverbs for a new age.

'We can have another drink there,' Henry offered.

'You see your role as chairman as a sort of maître d',' said Dr Bee.

Henry smiled, his smile of self-satisfaction.

'Sort of,' he agreed.

He was eager to offer drinks or suggest lunches at any excuse the Centre could provide, or he could provide the Centre. Visiting writers, media contacts, cognate organizations and the stake-holders, as he'd learned to call them, the arts ministries and their advisory bodies, state and federal. And anyone else.

'We are eating our profits away,' the Criminal complained.

'We are a non-profit making organization,' Henry responded. 'We are not expected to make a profit.'

'You can say that again,' said the Criminal.

'If we make a profit, they'll only cut our funding,' said Henry. One of the lessons he had learned from university over the years was always ask for more funding. They cut your requests back automatically, anyway, so never ask for less.

They sat out on the veranda and shared another bottle.

'Nice spot you've got here,' Pawley agreed. 'I might come on the committee.'

'You're living up the coast now,' Henry reminded him.

'I could fly down. It would be a way of paying for the ticket.'

'What would be?'

'Having this place pay for it,' said Pawley.

'I don't know about that,' said Henry.

'Go on,' said Pawley. 'It's not your money. I could be your regional representative. It's a politically sensitive issue, not neglecting the regions.'

'They have regional Writers' Centres.'

'So what?' said Pawley 'You still need a regional representative at the metropolitan Centre. You're bound to have some regional members. People who've quarrelled with the regional Centres. Bound to happen.'

'And why do they need to be represented by you?' Henry asked.

'They probably don't,' Pawley agreed. 'But there again, they should have a voice.'

'Why should anyone have a voice?' Dr Bee asked. 'The ideal membership would surely be one of obedient deaf mutes.'

'Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that,' said Henry.

'You will,' said Dr Bee.

As afternoon began to fade, the local lesbians walked their dogs through the grounds. Dr Bee slavered at them. They slavered back. The dogs, that is: predominantly.

'Bull dykes with bulldogs,' said Dr Bee.

'You can't say things like that here,' said Henry.

'No?'

'No.'

'You're punctiliously politically correct?'

'Yes,' said Henry. 'The Director is, anyway.'

'No jokes about bitches in britches? Dogs in togs?'

'Absolutely not.'

'I can see why you like it so much,' said Dr Bee. 'It must remind you of the latter days of the university.'

Pawley gazed at the trees. Down past the magnolias a bottle-brush began to sway as if blown by the winds, except that there were no winds. He watched it transfixed. In due course a harlequin coloured figure with a pom-pommed woollen hat emerged from the foliage, clutching a bouquet of bottle-brush branches and blooms. He approached them. Pawley watched him in perplexity, Dr Bee with visible distaste.

'Lovely evening, Henry,' the figure called out genially, passing into the office.

'One of the inmates, I presume,' said Dr Bee.

'A volunteer.'

'A volunteer inmate?'

'One of the Centre's volunteers,' said Henry. 'Cheerful fellow. Excellent value. He brightens the place up.'

'With his pom-pom.'

'With the floral arrangements. He keeps the Director's office supplied with flowers.'

'And branches.'

'And branches,' Henry agreed.

'And the pom-pom?'

'Keeps the ticks off.'

'The pom-pom? It frightens them off?'

'The hat. The hat protects him. Impossible to get ticks out of your hair once they dig in.'

'Don't they get into the wool of the hat?'

'I imagine he shakes it out and washes it.'

'The pom-pom too?'

'Oh, forget the bloody pom-pom, can't you?'

'I don't think I shall ever be able to,' said Dr Bee.

A young man in a tracksuit cut across the lawn and stood looking at them.

'Evening,' said Henry.

'Is this the Drug Dependence Clinic?' he asked.

'This is the Writers' Centre,' said Henry.

'Writers' Clinic?' said the young man. 'So where's the drugs?'

'Good question,' said Pawley.

Henry pointed into the distance.

The young man thanked him and walked on.

'They hand out drugs there?' Pawley asked.

'I don't think so,' said Henry. 'I think they're more concerned to take them away from you.'

'Forget that,' said Pawley.

'I think you've found your ideal ambience, Henry,' said Dr Bee, getting up. 'I'll leave you to it. The Writers' Clinic.'

'Drop by any time,' said Henry genially.

'Perhaps not,' said Dr Bee.

'I might,' said Pawley.

'I see the Centre as a bridge between the literary and the academic communities,' said Henry. 'Between the writers and the commentators - I hesitate to say critics. Interpreters, perhaps.'

'Between two sites that no longer exist,' said Pawley, 'both degraded by greed and usury. Cash values only.'

'Well,' Henry objected.

'It's a classic Mafia type situation. Build a bridge that connects nothing to nothing. No relationship to the needs of the real world in any way at all. Just a racket to suck some funds out of the taxpayers' pockets.'

'And you accept that valuation,' said Henry, taking the high moral ground. 'You've become defeatist in your old age.'

'Hard to be very positive,' said Pawley.

'And you accept the degradation of the world of literature and the universities.'

'Of course,' Pawley agreed. 'What else do you expect? The dominant ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class. It's only when you're within the system that you have to buy the delusion.'

'You're saying I have delusions?'

'Well,' said Pawley, 'well, let's put it like this, not necessarily delusions, but illusions, well,' he added, in a gesture of amelioration, or just as an irritant, 'possibly, Henry, possibly. What you've got to face up to, Henry, is the only reason for taking on the Writers' Centre is failure.'

'Failure!' said Henry. 'Whose failure?'

'Your failure, Henry. Who else did you have in mind?'

'I have no one else in mind. I took on the chair because - '

'Because it was there,' said Pawley. 'And because you had nothing else to do.'

'Because I was asked.'

'Many are asked,' said Pawley. 'I am not talking about your being asked. I am talking about your accepting the role.'

'Which you perceive as failure. Well, thank you for nothing,' Henry huffed.

'Let me rephrase it,' said Pawley. 'Let me say, you perceive yourself to be a failure.'

More huffing.

'I am not saying there is anything wrong with you,' said Pawley. 'Personally or otherwise. After all as the bard put it, there's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all.'

Overhead a couple of pelicans cruised in the thermals, eyeing off the fish market. In the trees the noisy mynahs made as much noise as they could. Bees buzzed around the blossoms of whatever was blossoming, vines, magnolias, jacarandas, bottle-brush.

'No one,' Pawley pronounced, 'does charity concerts, chairs committees, judges prize competitions, gives out awards at awards ceremonies, unless their career is in decline. It's a giveaway. A last desperate attempt to get media attention. A mote in the public eye. True Henry?'

Henry shifted from huffing to sniffing.

'You know it's true,' Pawley persisted.

The Director emerged for a smoke.

'I didn't know you two were still here,' she said. 'What are you plotting?'

'Nothing,' said Henry. 'Nothing at all,' he elaborated. 'Pawley is telling me I'm all washed up.'

'That's nice,' she said. 'Does that mean the glasses are clean for once? How considerate of you, Henry. Shall I get you a drink?'

He nodded.

'You're not an asset, Henry,' Pawley elaborated. 'You've never won any of those international prizes'

'They are marks of obloquy and shame,' said Henry.

'Of course.'

'Rewards for compromise and fatuity.'

'Naturally. Necessarily. As Louis B. Mayer said, "The best way to handle moviemakers is to give them awards. In that way they'll kill themselves to produce what I want. That's why the Academy Award was created."'

'Did he really say that?'

'Yes,' said Pawley. 'It's all about control. And it's quite clear the controllers aren't putting your name forward to the Nobel committee. Or the IMPAC. Or any other. But chairing the Writers' Centre isn't going to change anything. You have to recant, Henry. Publicly. Write a long piece on Writing in the Age of Terrorism. Announce you've put aside everything you were working on in order to address the urgent issues. Go on record saying writers can't afford to have strong opinions. Political opinions are the death of writing. You know the guff that's required. Conform, Henry, and announce your conformity. If you don't want to denounce the left, do a Rushdie and defame Islam and get yourself a knighthood.'

'Can't get them in Australia anymore.'

'An Order of Australia, then. You know what you have to do.'

'Do I?'

'Of course.

'For a start you can wash up when you've finished your drinks,' said the Director, bringing out a fresh bottle. 'The glasses are filthy. Housekeeping, Henry.'

'See,' said Pawley. 'You worry about your public profile and what does this place offer you? Housekeeping.'

'I'm not worried about my public profile.'

'I would be if I were you,' said Pawley.

'To Henry,' the Director said, holding up a drink. 'A splendid chair. Once we've got him house-trained.'

'If you want to do charity work, you should do something big,' Pawley suggested. 'Global warming. Carbon emissions. The nuclear energy industry will back you on that, can't fail with them behind you. All the so-called side products for bomb making. Or starvation in Africa,

reform outdated farming methods: the global seed cartels will love you for that. The environment, Henry.'

'Exactly,' said the Director. 'We'll never save the Australian environment till we stop people eating cattle and get them to eat kangaroos.'

'Eat kangaroos?' said Pawley, aghast.

'Natural fauna,' said the Director. 'It's the only way. Sustainability.'

'Kangaroos,' Pawley gasped. He sank into vegetative vegetarian speechlessness.

The silence was rent by a roaring noise. They looked up. An unmarked Boeing 747 flew past, low on its approach to the airport.

'Probably a CIA extraordinary rendition flight,' said Pawley.

'It's only at certain times of day they use that runway,' the Director told them. 'Apart from that it's pretty quiet. Most of the patients are locked away. Metaphorically speaking, of course,' she added. You had to be careful how you phrased things.

'They still have patients?' Pawley asked.

'Just a few.'

'Where are they?'

'Most of them are dosed up with lithium and largactil and turned out on the streets.'

'And now they're coming back under the guise of writers. Can't tell them apart. Same clientele, different job description.'

She laughed, unconvincingly.

'Why would they want to come back?'

'Nice grounds, sheltered environment,' Henry said, looking round appreciatively.

They were, it was. Trees reaching as far as he could see. Mown lawns. What could be pleasanter?

'Life's harsh out on the streets,' said Henry. 'Full of street poets.'

She ashed her cigarette and said nothing. Speak no ill of patients or poets.

'So where do they live?' Pawley asked.

'Poets?' said Henry. 'Wherever they can.'

'Patients.'

'The ones they turned out are in half-way houses. The ones still here are in the cottages. You must have seen them as you came in.'

'Those derelict places.'

'They're not all derelict.'

She left them to the remains of the bottle.

'And don't forget to wash up the glasses this time, Henry,' she reminded him.

It was just like home, he reflected, always instructions to do the washing up or some such thing. A home away from home. But larger. More acreage. Looked at in the right way it could be the country estate literary gents had merited in the past. Tolstoy freeing his slaves. Evelyn Waugh repelling journalists.

They looked carefully as they drove out. Still no signs of life, but some cottages looked more trim and cared for, their roofs still intact, their windows glazed. Presumably they were the ones that housed the remaining patients. But you never knew. They could have been torture cells for abusing abducted terrorist suspects.

'So fix it up, then, Henry, would you?' said Pawley, as Henry drove him to the airport.

'Fix what up?'

'Putting me on the committee.'

'I can't just fix it up like that.'

'Of course you can. Call yourself a Chairperson? Or is that why you prefer calling yourself Chair? Something to be sat on, is that it?'

'You'll have to charm the Director.'

'I'll drive down next time and bring her some dope,' said Pawley. 'Couldn't bring it on the plane with all the security checks. Organic, naturally grown. No hydroponics. No artificial lights. No additives. You want me to bring you some too? Course you do. Say nothing. No self-incrimination. I'll see to it. And you see to this other thing, Mr. Chair.'

3: Bloody Old People

'Bloody old people,' Dr Bee fumed.

He had been waiting in a queue at the post office behind an array of aged folk. Queues were always apt to put him into a fury. Post offices worldwide had a capacity for inducing apoplectic rage. Their arbitrary regulations, their bureaucratic procedures, never failed to provoke. And on top of that were these doddering dotards fiddling with their purses, their hands trembling as they dropped their wallets and tripped over their walking sticks and time strode remorselessly on toward the grave, Dr Bee still stuck in the queue with unfinished business.

And he had found himself shouting out in exasperation, 'Bloody old people!'

The counter staff, such as there were not otherwise engaged in smoking out the back or taking a tea break or staying at home on sick leave, gave him a quizzical look.

'But I don't feel old,' he said. 'I don't act old.'

'Certainly not,' said Pawley. 'You have the vigour of a young ram in heat.'

Dr Bee melted momentarily, flicking his tongue across his lips in sensual recollection. Or expectation, even.

'And why not? Being old is a state of mind,' he said.

'You dissociate yourself from your contemporaries,' said Pawley.

'I certainly do.'

'Not for you the carpet slippers and cardigan.'

Dr Bee shuddered.

'You're as bad as the Director,' said Henry. 'She went into a road rage in the car park about dithering old men. One of the volunteers was trying to park and backed into her.'

'I've often thought of backing into her,' Dr Bee said reflectively.

'This old codger was still in his car.'

'Wrong sort of body contact,' said Dr Bee.

'She practically dragged him out of the seat and banged him up against the wall of the Centre.'

'Banged him up against the wall?' said Dr Bee. 'How delightfully louche. Do you think you could ask her if she would bang me up against a wall, some time? Oh, the elegant ambiguity of the English language. How well you preserve it at the Writers' Clinic.'

They sat in the window of the Golden Bowl and looked across the street. The boutique, or beauty parlour, or brothel, whatever it had professed to be and whatever it might have been was no longer there. The girls no longer paraded along the pavement carrying the bottles of mineral water and cardboard cups of café latte in and out of its doors. All was change and decay.

'Mind you,' said Henry, 'I can't say I blame her. There are some irritating old sods who hang around the place.'

'Is that so?' said Pawley. 'Present company excepted, no doubt.'

'I'm sick of them coming up to me and saying, "Are you a member? Have you written a book?"'

'I thought you liked to be asked about your writing,' said Dr Bee. 'It used to be your strategy of inveiglement, as I recall.'

Recall. The very word was like a tolling bell, a reminder that everything was in the past now, that there was no present or future left.

'I think they might at least recognize the Chair of the place.'

'Ah, the vanity of old men,' said Pawley.

'It's not vanity. It's just common sense. Ignorant old buffers.'

'And what do you reply to them when they ask if you've written a book?' Dr Bee asked.

'I tell them that I am the Chair and that I have written the odd book or two.'

'And then?'

'The last old bastard who did it asked me how many.'

'Tell us,' said Pawley.

'Depends on how you calculate,' said Henry.

'Always an evasive response.'

'No, it isn't,' said Henry. 'It depends if you count edited books. Depends if you count new selections from previous volumes. That sort of thing.'

'A rough estimate will do,' said Dr Bee.

'I told him forty or fifty. And you know what he said?'

'Tell us,' said Pawley.

'He said, the hide of the man, '"Too many. I reckon anyone who writes more than a dozen books has written too many. If you can't say what you want in a dozen books, then you're not trying," he said. The cheek of it.'

'Is that so?' said Dr Bee reflectively. ‘He has a point.’

'Like the Chinese policy on population growth. Limit the number of kids you can have,' Pawley said. Approvingly, it sounded. 'Limit the number of books any one writer is allowed to produce. A lot to be said for it.'

'You could have replied like Sir Walter Scott,' Dr Bee suggested, 'apologizing for a manuscript being so long because he hadn't had time to make it shorter.'

Henry disregarded them. He was still fulminating about the membership. ‘Bunch of amateurs,’ he said from his professional height.

‘Amateurs and gentlemen,’ said Dr Bee. ‘After all, to be a writer is the dream of many a gentleman.’

‘You include yourself, of course,’ Henry snarled, ‘never having been one for over-production.’

‘I am happy to include myself amongst them,’ said Dr Bee. ‘But as for the lemming like rush into print, I am happy to stand aside. Authorship is the dream of many a gentleman. But one would never put one’s name to a book. Nothing as vulgar as that. Even if it were to be published. None of this vulgar publicity seeking. I think you are too dismissive of the membership, Henry. Smacks of a certain anxiety to distance yourself. What, after all, differentiates you from them?’

‘I am not ashamed to publish,’ said Henry.

‘Indeed, when you can. But nor are they.’

‘At least my work comes from commercially recognized presses.’

‘Some of it.’

‘So commerce is now the legitimization of value, is it?’ Pawley chipped in. ‘Aesthetics as a branch of economics.’

‘Don’t you start too,’ said Henry.

‘You can’t blame them for not having published. You yourself are always saying how difficult it is becoming.’

'They don't even know who the Chair is, who the committee members are. They've never heard of any of the visiting writers. They don't read anything. All they're interested in is their own writing.'

'Much like you,' said Pawley. 'You can't blame them for that. I worry about you sometimes Henry. You are beginning to sound like an administrator in your contempt for your constituency.’

Henry sniffed and did not deign to reply. He swivelled round in his chair and stretched out his legs. Aching legs. Old man's legs.

'Oh, Lord,' he said, tucking them back beneath the table as fast as he could. The glasses shook and spilled, the bottle of Riverina Semillon Chardonnay blend rocked precariously and overturned as he knocked the table legs. The waiter strolled over and mopped up the debris.

'Another bottle?' he asked.

'Another bottle,' they agreed.

'Tell us,' said Dr Bee, 'what prompted this? A sudden cramp? A visitation from the Lord. An intimation of mortality? Or immortality in your case, of course, as a writer.'

'Nothing,' said Henry.

'Nothing will come of nothing,' said Pawley. It seemed a pity not to use those old quotations so dutifully learned so long ago, give them another run before they faded altogether. Love letters in the sand. 'On a day like today,' he sang softly to himself.

'Sorry about that,' said Henry. 'Got a bit of a shock.'

'Go on,' Dr Bee encouraged.

'Embarrassing, really.'

'We are broad-minded,' said Dr Bee.

The waiter returned with the bottle, held it up for Henry's approval. Henry gave a perfunctory nod, eyes glazed, deciphering nothing. Then the bottle was opened and the waiter held it ready to pour, waiting for someone to taste. They waved him away. The time for tasting had passed.

'Just pour it and piss off?' he asked.

'The sooner the better,' said Henry.

'We can pour it ourselves,' Dr Bee snapped.

‘You’re sure?’ the waiter asked.

'We're not that incapacitated.'

'Whatever you say,' said the waiter, his doubts silent but emphatic.

Pawley nodded, sunk beneath years of suspicion. Generally in these latter times it was better to nod than to speak. The least said the better. Any restaurant where you ate regularly might well be bugged, a microphone buried in the parmesan. Technically feasible. Even if you avoided paying by credit card people still got to know where you ate. Should they want to. The only secure place to talk was on a windswept deserted beach. Silently, to yourself.

Henry filled their glasses with tremulous hand.

'I suddenly noticed I was wearing odd shoes,' he said.

'Show us,' said Dr Bee.

Henry swung his feet out into view, and as swiftly drew them back beneath the table, like a foot-fetish flasher.

'Very odd,' said Pawley. 'They don't seem to match.'

'I bet you've got another pair just the same at home,' said Dr Bee.

'Can't think how it happened.'

'Just another seniors' moment,' said Dr Bee. 'Were you planning to go to the post office? Dressing for the queue?'

'It happened to me once,' said Pawley reminiscently. 'Some dreadful university examiners' meeting. I swung my feet up onto the table to express my disgust for the shenanigans. And lo and behold! Not just shoes, Henry. Cowboy boots.'

'Cowboy boots,' said Dr Bee.

'Before I'd got disillusioned with things American,' said Pawley.

'Ah,' said Dr Bee. 'Gotten disillusion I believe you used to say in those heady days. Before you had gotten disillusioned.'

'Could be,' Pawley agreed. Insouciantly. 'Souvenirs of a trip to California, anyway.'

'I thought cowboys came from Texas,' said Henry.

'They made the cowboy movies in California, though,' said Pawley. 'Which is more authentic, illusion or reality?'

No one had an answer for that one.

'So you went to some local theatrical costumiers?' said Dr Bee.

'Sure did. Bought one pair of burnished dark brown, the other of highly tooled light ochre.'

'Must have been a striking mismatch.'

'Full on,' Pawley agreed.

'What did you do?' Henry asked, his own odd couple tucked firmly beneath his chair.

'Swung them swiftly below the table, waited till everyone had left the room before I emerged, then scuttled off home and changed.'

'Changed them both?' asked Dr Bee.

'Of course these days I would have toughed it out. Height of fashion. Etonians and French intellectuals.'

'Is that so?' Henry asked. Hopefully.

'So they tell me. In socks, anyway.'

He bent down to look at Henry's ill-matched loafers.

'You could be out there on the catwalk absolutely up to the minute.'

'Are you having me on?' Henry asked.

'Would I do that? Take a look round, see what people are wearing. Odd shoes are the least of it. Anyway, most people wear trainers. Shoes are positively archaic. Odd enough in themselves. Old men's gear.'

'Enough of this old men,' said Dr Bee.

'You may rail against bloody old people,' said Pawley, 'but the fact remains, we are no longer in our prime.'

'With which depressing observation you ensure that everything else pales into insignificance,' said Dr Bee.

'I'm not sure you can say pales anymore,' said Pawley. 'Could be construed as racially discriminating.'

'Darkens?' Dr Bee suggested.

'Sounds a bit narrowly Christian,' said Pawley. 'A bit eschatological. Manichean, maybe. Insufficiently multicultural.'

'Are we able to say anything anymore?' Dr Bee asked.

'I shouldn't have thought so,' said Pawley.

In the old days they would have ordered mascarpone or tiramisu or even profito rolls. Now they heard Villon's refrain all around them. *Timor mortis conturbat me*. No longer did Henry light up a cigarette or Pawley a joint, as they had in the days before smoking was outlawed. Nor did they go outside onto the pavement and smoke on the windy street. Now they were not allowed to smoke at all any more, by law, by doctors, by acupuncturists, by wives. They declined the waiter's suggestion of coffee, and withstood his barely disguised disgust. Dr Bee ordered tea. Recent studies had shown that tea reduced stress levels, he told them. Henry and Pawley still declined it. The waiter brought them out three complimentary limoncello liqueurs in desperation.

'For the digestion,' he assured them

Twenty-five per cent proof.

They slumped there sipping at it. Drunken old men of a certain age, forgotten by the world, and reciprocating its disregard.

4: What's in a Name?

Henry Lancaster sat on the veranda of the Writers' Centre and surveyed the grounds. The jacarandas. The wattles. The magnolias. The covered walkway draped in vines. The fire hydrant. His grounds, in a sense. His imperium. The Duchy of Lancaster. He relaxed in contentment. The magnolias bloomed as splendidly as on any ante-bellum southern slave owner's plantation. But the slaves had gone. No baying hounds, no Afro-American jungle music blasting out. What an improvement on the university. No students. No colleagues. Like Adam before the Lord removed one of his ribs, he savoured the satisfactions of solitude. Such peace. Such calm. The groves of Arcady rather than Academe.

The Director came out with a glass of chilled white wine and placed it in his ready hand.

Could this have happened in his past life? In that world where academics were wage-slave hirelings and administrators now ruled the roost.

He beamed his satisfaction.

'What about you?' he asked. Graciously. The ambience was encouraging his innate graciousness, he decided. After all those grudging years, all those resentments, well attested in the literature as a concomitant of campus life. Probably pre-Reformation monasteries would have been much the same.

'Have to work,' she said.

Idyllic, Henry reflected. Here he was, chairing the Centre in afternoon tranquillity while others tended to the work.

'The bottle's in the fridge,' she said. 'Just help yourself.'

'I will,' he said. And did.

He took the bottle out with him. Saved going back and forward and disturbing the eager office workers. Not that he was being idle himself. Far from it. He was reflecting on policy changes he might initiate. A guiding hand. All those years of experience in the literature racket. Let alone the university.

Poet's Corner, he reflected. A Mudgee wine, named in honour of Henry Lawson. The impoverished alcoholic writer whom no one wanted to deal with in his later years, but who was rewarded with a state funeral. Funny how he was still popularly thought of as a poet. Yet the literary world remembered him for his short stories. Short Story Writer's Corner. Did that have quite the ring? Fictioneer's Field? Why not something like that? Why let the poets have all the publicity? Novelist's Drop, how about that? A bit too close to Brewers' Droop, perhaps, with intimations of hanging by the neck. Novelist's Noggin, maybe.

He poured himself another glass.

'Pity we couldn't have a more appropriate wine,' he suggested, when the Director joined him after the office closed.

'What's wrong with it?' she asked.

Was she asking his judgement as a connoisseur or was there a note of challenge and touchiness?

'Nothing's wrong with it as a drink.'

'As a drink? So what else do you want?'

'The wine's fine. Excellent, indeed. It's just the name.'

'That's what it's called.'

'But poets,' said Henry.

'Ah, yes, poets,' she said.

'I've got nothing against poets,' Henry hastened to assure her.

'Wait till you deal with some of the ones round here.'

'But what about novelists? And dramatists?'

'They can be a pain, too.'

'I mean, shouldn't they be represented?'

'They are,' she said. 'You're a novelist. Thingo's a playwright.'

'I don't mean on the committee.'

'Oh, good,' she said. She lit a cigarette and took a puff. 'I thought you were complaining.'

'Not at all,' said Henry. 'Never.'

He poured himself some more wine, held the bottle up as if to study it. Maybe he was studying it.

'It would be nice to have a more appropriate label.'

'Go on,' she said. 'Like what?'

'I don't know.'

'You want me to write to the vineyard and suggest they name something after novelists? Novelist's Bend? Short Story Writer's Alley?'

'They don't sound like market winners to me,' said Henry. 'They don't have that, whatever it is, you know.'

'Beaujolais Nouvelle.'

'That's better,' he agreed. 'Something like that. Chateau Roman, maybe.'

'Good one,' she said.

They drank to it, clicked glasses in the gentle evening.

'Chateau Roman,' he reflected. 'Might be a good name for this building.'

'Go for it,' she said.

Anything to keep the old boy sweet and quiet. Though he was getting garrulous rather than quiet. Might have to ration his drinking in future.

'Or the House of Fiction,' he continued, getting on stream, into full flow, like the rapidly coursing wine. 'A tribute to the master.'

'Bring it up at the Management Committee meeting,' she said.

'You reckon?'

'Of course.'

Henry beamed. In all the long years at university no one had encouraged him to bring up anything at a meeting. The principle had always been to suppress suggestions.

'I might,' he said.

'Do,' she said, filling his glass.

Nothing like having a friendly Chair.

Henry raised the issue at the next meeting of the management committee. He sat comfortably in the chair. No one had ever trusted him to chair anything before. He rather enjoyed the feeling of genial authority. An elder statesman of the arts, planning for the future of the Commonwealth of Letters. The Director sat at his right hand, prompting him with facts and figures whenever he faltered. What a team they made! And the gourmet sandwiches she ordered in. And the Poet's Corner wine.

He raised the issue under any other business.

There was an uproar.

'Why fiction?' asked Sam Samson, sitting there like a caricature of a poet, Robert Graves in fatuous hat and flowing locks. Robert Creeley in cowboy boots. Sam wasn't a bad poet, as poets went, Henry conceded. Quite a good one. But now he was dressing like a bad one. Nothing against Graves' poems. Or Creeley's. But the floppy hat, floppy scarf, floppy hair over the floppy collar created the impression of a charlatan. A classic rendition, inevitably clichéd. Does everything succumb to commodification and celebrity? Henry asked himself. Is it all a matter of endless advertisement, product identification, branding, is it all in fact a circus?

Meanwhile Sam Samson asked again why fiction? Novelists made all the money, why did they need buildings named after them?

'Actually, dramatists make more,' said the Director, who had been looking at the latest Arts Ministry figures.

'It's not just novelists,' said Henry. 'There's children's fiction.'

'Paedophilia,' said Sam. 'Interfering with the hearts and minds of the young.'

'Short stories,' said Henry.

'Do you want to call it the Short Story Embassy?' the Director asked.

'Everyone knows poets are the source of creation. Poesis,' Sam intoned. 'Makars. The original. Everything else follows from us.'

'Yeah,' said Sara, Mrs Poet.

'So what do you suggest?' the Director asked. Uninvolved in this issue, she could afford to be democratic and conciliatory. When it didn't matter. Henry glared at her. A sideways glare.

'The Unacknowledged Legislative Assembly,' said Sam.

'Why unacknowledged?' said Sara.

'What's she doing here?' Henry asked.

'She's a member. Members can attend management committee meetings.'

'Fuck that,' said Henry.

'It encourages participation,' said the Director.

'Fuck that, too,' said Henry.

'They can't vote. Only the committee can vote.'

'Well, that's something.'

'Someone tell me,' Sara called out again, 'why unacknowledged?'

'Sara,' said Sam, holding his face in his hands, 'Shelley. Shelley, Sara.' Repeating it like a mantra. In Allen Ginsberg mode now. Next thing he'd be taking off his clothes. Henry could see his beady eyes peeping between this fingers at the world out there. His audience. Poets knew to take any audience they could get.

'Poets deserve every acknowledgement,' said Sara. 'They should be recognized.' And their wives, too. All their wives, come to that.

'Statues on street corners,' said Sam.

'Yes,' said Sara, 'why don't we have statues of poets here? What is this place?'

'Where are the busts of Homer?' Sam asked

'Where are the busts of Sappho?' Sara asked. 'This is supposed to be a Writers' Centre.'

'There are other writers than poets,' said Henry.

'Stamp them out,' said Sara.

'Yes,' said Thingo, the dramatist, 'what about dramatists?'

'What about dramatists?' Henry said. 'Do you have a suggestion? The Theatre of the Absurd?'

'The Operating Theatre,' said Sam. 'Surgical Strike. The Theatre of War.'

Henry fixed them all with a firm gaze. They took no notice.

'Mr Chairman,' the token legal entity began, 'I object to the way this was brought up under any other business.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Sam.

'It should have been priority business,' said Sara.

'Shut up, Sara,' said Henry.

'Shut up yourself,' she said. 'Just because you don't have a poetic bone in your body. You know what it's like being a poet?'

'Fortunately not,' said Henry.

'Objection,' said Sam.

'What do you mean objection?' Henry asked.

Sam looked momentarily puzzled. Meaning? What had meaning to do with poets?

'This isn't a courtroom,' said Henry.

'It will be,' said Sara. 'We'll take you to court for discrimination. Discrimination against poets.'

'Point of order,' the legal entity called out.

'Dissent from the chair,' said Thingo.

'Shut up the lot of you,' said Henry.

No one took any notice. No one listened. The Director poured him a drink and one for herself.

'Now you've done it,' she said.

'I thought you said you wanted participation,' said Henry.

'The theatre of Epidaurus,' the dramatist declaimed.

'Mount Olympus,' said Sam. 'Xanadu.'

'What about women?' said Sara. 'What about Sylvia Plath?'

'What about Homer?' said the legal entity who prided himself on his learning.

'What about Homer?' Sara asked.

'Homer was a woman,' said the legal entity. 'What about essayists? Charles Lamb house.'

'The sheepfold,' said Henry.

'The abattoir,' said Sam.

The Director offered Henry a gourmet sandwich.

'Vegetarian,' she said. 'The meat ones have all gone.'

Henry munched on goats cheese and sun-dried tomato and roasted egg-plant.

'Give them another five minutes while we finish the sandwiches and then call them to order,' she said. 'Try the Russian egg mayonnaise, they're good.'

'We're running out of wine,' said Henry.

She headed off to the office fridge where the reserve supply was chilling. When she came back and they'd filled their glasses and cleaned up the sandwich plate, Henry called for order. No one responded.

'Where's the gavel?' he asked.

'The what?'

'The gavel.'

'How quaint you are sometimes, Henry,' she said.

'Something to beat the table with and get them to shut up.'

She took off her shoe and handed it to him. Henry whacked the table with the heel.

'Cinderella's Ballroom,' said Sam.

'Quiet,' called Henry, hammering the table again.

'I should like to propose,' the legal entity began.

'Hear hear,' said Sara, holding up her glass. 'Propose to me,' she said.

'Propose that we set up a committee.'

'Whoopee!' yelled Sara.

The eternal solution to all our woes. A committee.

'Do we have a seconder?' Henry asked.

Sara raised her hand.

'It has to be a committee member,' said the Director.

'Discrimination,' Sara yelled.

Thingo seconded it.

A committee on naming names was established.

'That should settle it,' said the Director.

'Settle it how?' Henry asked.

'You want nothing to happen, you set up a committee.'

'But I don't want nothing to happen,' said Henry. 'I wanted to call it the House of Fiction.'

'You've lost that one,' she said.

'How about the House of Correction?' said Henry. 'None of them knows anything. None of them can spell, for a start.'

They sat out on the veranda as the committee dispersed into the night. The fruit bats chattered in the fig trees. The owl hooted mournfully.

'What a fiasco!' said Henry.

'Not to worry. It gives them something unimportant to get their teeth into. Makes them think they're involved. Keeps them occupied. And they soon get bored. Just need to toss them a bone now and then.'

'And I was the bone?' said Henry.

'Not you personally,' she said.

'Just my suggestion.'

'It turned out that way,' she said.

'As long as you're happy,' he said. Perhaps a little acidly.

'Keeps them away from the real issues,' she said.

'The real issues?' said Henry, 'what are they?'

'You'll find out soon enough,' she said.

'The House of Mystery,' said Henry.

The owls hooted in agreement. Or derision.

'I wish I'd never raised the issue.'

'But you did.'

There was no denying it. He topped up their glasses. Sweet oblivion. Or classic dry white oblivion.

'Never mind,' she said. 'You will no doubt recollect the episode with amusement in your memoirs.'

'How did you know I was writing my memoirs?' he asked.

'Don't all writers write their memoirs when they reach a certain age?'

'I'm not that old,' he said. 'Anyway, some do at an early age.'

'When they've run out of ideas for novels,' she elucidated.

'I have not run out of ideas for novels. Far from it.'

'Excellent,' she said.

Henry sat there sulking a while in surly silence.

'You might even learn from it,' the Director offered.

'What is there to learn from?' he snapped.

'Ah, there you are, you see,' she said. 'Your mind is closed. Maybe you should learn to open it. Who knows what might flood in? Inspiration, maybe. Perhaps you should take one of our workshops. Writing and yoga, maybe. It would do you good.'

'How can I take a workshop on yoga? I don't know anything about it.'

'I didn't mean you should teach it, Henry,' she said. 'Enrol as a student.'

He grunted.

'It will keep you young and fit,' she added. 'You don't want to become a dithering old man, Henry. I can't stand dithering old men. This will fix you up. Right as rain.'

'Writers' Rain,' Henry pondered. Might sound a bit watery for a wine label. Yet every cloud has a silver lining, including rain-clouds. He tried again. More positively.

'Writers Reign.'

Always good to have a positive ending. Despite all the evidence to the contrary.

5: The Valley of the Weed

Pawley stretched out his legs. His boots were mud-spattered, red clay stuck between sole and heel.

'Is this the insignia of the country?' Dr Bee asked with distaste. 'Contemporary Arcadian? Horatian? Bœotian?'

Pawley shrugged.

Mud-spattered Blundstone boots. Work boots, now that he'd thrown out his cowboy boots in a fit of revulsion from U. S. foreign policy. Put them in the garbage. Didn't even want them recycled by the Salvos or St Vinnie's and sent to Afghanistan.

Pawley had taken early retirement too and moved up the north coast. Way up north.

'What on earth did you do that for?' Dr Bee asked.

'For the good earth,' said Pawley. 'The Valley of the Weed.'

'The idiocy of rural life,' said Dr Bee. 'I didn't ask where, I asked why.'

'That is why,' said Pawley. 'Weed Shire. High as the sky. Organic sinsemilla. Grow your own ganja or purchase from any local supplier. They used to call me a weed at school. You know how brutal schools are. Weedy, they called me. But now I realize it may not have been intentional bullying. I think they had second sight. It was a vision they were given. My devotion to the weed.'

'And that's why they called you dopey, too?' said Dr Bee.

'Could be,' Pawley conceded genially.

'Potty,' Henry added.

'And that's why you spent your days reading the *Arabian Nights* rather than playing football. Or cricket.'

'Spot on,' said Pawley.

'A bit unpatriotic,' Henry suggested.

'A premature orientalist,' Pawley agreed.

'Don't you think it's unseemly at your age?'

'What, orientalism?'

'Addiction.'

'I wouldn't call it addiction,' said Pawley. 'Sometimes I don't even feel like it. Some mornings I feel so down I don't even feel well enough to do any dope. But I make myself take some. And then I feel better. Positive again. '

'You force it on yourself.'

'Thank the Lord,' said Pawley. 'Only thing that bucks me up. It's good for you, too. The THC prevents blood vessels becoming blocked by atherosclerosis.'

'Tell us more,' said Henry.

'Atherosclerosis is the inflammation that causes the build-up of immune cells that causes narrowing of the arteries.'

'You keep up with the research?' said Henry.

'Sure do.'

'Has it ever occurred to you that being so down might be a consequence of all the dope you're using?'

'Sure,' said Pawley. 'I've considered it. But no. I'm down anyway. The way I am. The human condition, reflecting on it, my own place in it. That brings you down. But stoned, you get a rosier view.'

'But is it a truer view?'

'Depends on your attitude of mind,' said Pawley. 'You can make it so.'

'Make it true?'

Pawley nodded.

'Arbitrarily,' Dr Bee persisted.

'I wouldn't say arbitrarily,' said Pawley. 'You look at it a different way, things just fall into place. In the Valley of the Weed.'

'Dependency?' Dr Bee suggested. 'A habit? Substance abuse?'

'I certainly wouldn't call it abuse,' said Pawley. 'What's with the abuse? Substance use, sure, why not? That's what it's for, to use. The good Lord provided it. Abuse makes it sound like child abuse or something. A terrible way of defaming it. Someone thought that up out of sheer malignity and the label stuck. To me,' said Pawley, 'it's just like a morning pot of tea, or an evening's bottle of red.'

'Both of which you also enjoy.'

'You bet. Both good for you. Red wine especially. Rich in anti-oxidants. Same as dark chocolate.'

'There are some people who would find a bottle a day excessive,' said Dr Bee.

'Americans,' said Pawley dismissively. 'They want to destroy the world. Remember prohibition. They never give up. No more than a glass of wine a day. I've met doctors like that here. I prefer the French attitude. A bottle a day. A litre for manual workers.'

'I don't see how a retired academic can be seen as a manual worker,' said Dr Bee.

'I saw up fire-wood. Hang out the washing. Mow the grass. Rip out lantana. It's all exercise. Useful labour, not useless toil. The distinction William Morris made.'

'All day and every day?'

'Most days I do something.'

'For how long?'

'Oh, an hour. Sometimes less. Sometimes just ten minutes. But it's still manual labour. Justifies a litre a day. If you want, that is.'

'Want what?'

'To justify it. Want to drink a litre. I'm focussing on getting relaxed about things. The stress caused by prohibitions causes far more illness than what is being prohibited.'

'Is that so?' said Dr Bee.

'Without a doubt.'

'And you feel all right?' Henry asked.

'Never felt better. How about you?'

'Oh,' said Henry, 'I don't know. Can't handle it like I used to. Feel a bit seedy in the morning if I drink too much.'

'How much is too much?' Dr Bee asked.

'Too much is when you feel seedy,' said Pawley. 'A couple of bottles, maybe.'

'Not these days,' said Henry. 'Anything more than a bottle is enough.'

'Enough to drink?'

'Enough to make you feel seedy. Though,' he added, 'I did get a nice Beaujolais on special and I found I was getting through a couple of bottles a night. It was so light. Innocuous.'

'That's what they used to say about white wine,' said Dr Bee.

'What did they say?'

'It's not alcoholic, it's only white wine.'

'Fair enough,' said Pawley.

'But that's not true.'

'Of course it isn't.'

'Some wines knock you around more than others,' said Pawley. 'It's the additives. Sulphites. They overload them.'

'Nothing to do with the alcohol,' said Dr Bee.

'No,' said Pawley.

'It depends on the time of day,' said Henry. 'If I drink red at lunch, I fall asleep. While a white at night seems too thin to go to sleep on.'

'Can't say I notice much difference,' said Pawley.

'That's because you're always stoned before you start,' said Dr Bee.

'Could be,' Pawley agreed.

Dr Bee snorted.

'The real trouble though,' Pawley elaborated, 'is when you start getting too socially responsible. You decide you can't go driving around when you've had a few drinks or a few joints or whatever. Most of the time it's not safe to go anywhere, all the cops around. Booze busses everywhere. RBTs. So you get, like, kind of isolated. If you're not careful. Can't even afford to pick up hitch-hikers.'

Dr Bee perked up. 'Why's that? I should have thought the whole point of living where you live is that the place is crawling with healthy young German happy wanderers. Geisha girls on their gap year. Hippy progeny heading for the hills.'

'Not on,' said Pawley. 'You have an accident, you're wide open to criminal negligence in a civil action case. Hitch-hiker becomes paraplegic. Lawyers sue you for being stoned. Insurance company refuses to pay out. You're finished. Same if you've been drinking. What has happened to the world we live in when you can't give people lifts anymore?'

'So much for community,' said Henry.

'I don't know,' said Dr Bee. 'Some might think it a highly raised community sense that prevents Pawley from giving lifts to those young people whose lives he would endanger.'

'That's right,' said Pawley. 'So you end up grossing out in front of the solid-fuel burner.'

'What on earth is that?' Dr Bee asked.

'The old log fire under another name.'

'And you get smashed.'

'Nothing else to do. Too smashed to venture out on the roads so you stay at home and get even more smashed. The way we live now, comrade.

'So you stay at home and vegetate,' said Dr Bee. 'A living death.'

'All a bit sad,' Pawley agreed.

'You or it?' Dr Bee asked.

'You have to watch it, I agree,' said Pawley. 'When you're not working any more you don't have to go anywhere. So you don't. And then you start to dread going out. Every encounter a struggle. You go to fruit stalls at farm gates where you put coins in a box for tomatoes or bananas or sweet potatoes or custard apples so you don't have to encounter anyone. No words spoken here. You put off doing unpleasant things so it gets even harder when you do go out. Your protective psychic calluses have gone.'

'Your what?'

'When you do a lot of manual labour, your hands toughen up, you develop calluses so that you don't cut yourself all the time. It's the same with consciousness. If you have to encounter a lot of people, your immune system develops these psychic calluses so you don't get damaged by all the human contact. But if you don't go out regularly and consistently and for long enough,

these calluses go and it's just the fragile membrane of your psychic skin between you and the world.'

'So what do you do up there?' Dr Bee persisted.

'Looking for ideas to fill your empty life with?' Pawley asked.

Dr Bee sniffed.

'Do?' Pawley began. 'I do the usual things people do. Go to the doctor, the chemist, the acupuncturist, the health food shop. I shop, I wash, I hang out washing, I wash up, I bring in the washing, I put out the garbage, I go to the recycling dump, I saw up fire-wood, I break up kindling, I lay fires, I take out ashes.'

'So nothing,' said Dr Bee.

'Nothing?' said Pawley. 'That, dear friend, is life. In all its rich variety. As celebrated by Tolstoy and other sages.'

'It sounds horrendous,' said Dr Bee.

'Sometimes I catch mice,' Pawley offered.

'And shoot wild boar?' Dr Bee asked, his nostrils flaring with the scent of the chase.

'Just mice.'

'You shoot them?'

'I catch them.'

'And make yourself a Davy Crockett hat from the skins?'

'I said catch, not kill,' said Pawley. 'I take them down to the creek.'

'Why don't you drown them in the sink?'

'I don't drown them. I set them free.'

'What a kindly soul you are,' said Henry.

'Thank you.'

'How many have you caught?'

'Twenty-seven last week.'

'How do you know it's not the same one coming back in?'

'I don't, I guess.'

'Why don't you tag it?'

'Their legs are too small.'

'Spray paint it.'

'Spray paint? It would traumatize it.'

'A jab of nail varnish.'

'Nail varnish?' He looked at Henry's hands. The fingers were unpainted. Maybe he painted his toes. 'They're incredibly small. I doubt you could see their nails with the naked eye.'

'Just dab their fur.'

'Or a branding iron,' said Dr Bee.

Pawley looked at them in horror.

'Why don't you just put down baits?' Dr Bee suggested. 'Save a lot of trouble. Henry would give you some of his warfarin, wouldn't you Henry.'

Henry smiled thinly.

'I don't think the country's for me,' Henry reflected, looking at Pawley's disgusting boots and looking away again. 'It's all too boring.'

'Boring? Grooving on nature? Walking on the beach?'

'I need material,' said Henry.

'Driftwood, sea-shells, seaweed,' Pawley offered. 'You know what I look forward to. The pleasures of beachcombing. Gazing at the surf. Watching the whales and dolphins. Just being. Just being and grooving along on the beauties of nature.'

'What are the wild waves saying?' Dr Bee intoned.

'Exactly,' said Pawley. 'They are saying a lot.'

Dr Bee shook his head in despair.

'I need plots,' said Henry, 'material to write about.'

'Smoke some weed,' said Pawley. 'The Valley's own. That will give you all the plots you need. Really gets the conspiracy theories going.'

'I'm bored with conspiracies,' said Henry.

'Bored with life, bored with conspiracies, you worry me Henry. Conspiracies and life are always with us.'

'Until we die,' said Henry.

'Could be any day now,' Dr Bee assured them.

6: Lightning Strike

Henry had been sinking into a morose depression. He was encased in dissatisfaction. The source was simple and he knew it all too well to go into it. He wasn't writing anything. After a splendid burst of production upon breaking with the university, he had dropped back into the all too familiar frustrations of the writer's life. The non-writer's life. It wasn't writer's block. He did not

believe in writer's block. If you were going to write, just write. The problem was that he wasn't: just writing. There was nothing he felt impelled to write about. He was devoid of ideas, inspiration, motivation. And it made him grumpy.

'You're written enough,' said Pawley.

It was meant well. It was meant to cheer him. A slap on the back. Good work, old chap. Now lay off for a bit. But all it did was make him grumpier.

'What do you mean, enough?' he snarled.

'You can afford to lie back and relax.'

'I don't want to relax.'

'Rigid, if not frigid,' said Dr Bee. 'Just shut your eyes and think of England. Or if not England, then at least the colonies.'

'We don't call them colonies anymore,' said Henry.

'I do,' said Dr Bee.

'The world is overrun with unnecessary books,' said Pawley. 'Why add to them?'

'I try not to write the unnecessary,' said Henry, with an icy modesty.

'Try harder,' suggested Dr Bee.

Part of the problem was that flurry of production. He had produced more than the market could bear. Or at least more than his agent and publisher could get round to reading. He felt like P. G. Wodehouse emerging from internment, four manuscripts completed, and a reputation in tatters. With a batch of manuscripts in holding pattern, circling round waiting to land, or mothballed and stored in hangars, it was hard to get motivated to write more.

'So the problem is in not getting published,' said Pawley.

'They will be published eventually.'

'So what's the problem?'

Henry shook his head, either in refusal to answer or in confession of ignorance.

'Have a smoke,' said Pawley. 'Get yourself some ideas.'

And then it all changed. Henry arrived at the Golden Bowl positively beaming. Wreathed in seraphic satisfaction.

'All right, tell us,' said Dr Bee, 'you have just refused the Nobel prize.'

'No,' said Henry. 'Not yet, that is,' he added.

'The Man Booker International,' said Pawley.

'No.'

'Woman Booker?' Dr Bee asked, speculatively.

'Prizes are shit,' said Henry. 'Forget prizes.'

'So you haven't won anything,' Dr Bee persisted.

'Just liberation,' said Henry. 'I was struck by lightning.'

Dr Bee took out his reading glasses and peered at Henry more closely.

'A TIR?'

'What's that?'

'A transient ischemic response. When you go partially blind. As you get older these things happen.'

'I haven't gone blind.'

'No sign of scorching beyond a few old hash burns,' Pawley observed.

'Not me personally,' said Henry. 'The house.'

'It burned down.'

'No, the house wasn't hurt. But the modem was taken out.'

'Modish,' said Dr Bee.

'A modem, old chap,' said Henry. 'It's a -.' Though exactly what it was he found he couldn't quite describe.

'I know what a modem is, Henry,' said Dr Bee, waspishly. 'I was remarking on the modishness of your discourse these days. Your command of the new.'

'Ancient and modem,' Pawley chimed in.

Henry and Dr Bee glowered at him together.

'Anyway,' said Henry, 'the computer was hit.'

'Ah, the computer,' said Dr Bee. He took out his fountain pen. 'You should try one of these, never have that sort of problem.'

'It wasn't a problem,' said Henry. 'At least it is, but it was also a blessing.'

'Ah,' said Dr Bee. 'Divine illumination. So now you are empowered, as the feminists say. Like one of those Cold War science-fiction movies. Scorching words. The man with electric finger tips.'

'Something like that,' said Henry, his voice positively crackling.

They looked at him in distaste. Such happiness and self-satisfaction were deeply distressing. Pawley poured a glass of Trebiano Rubicone with shaking hand.

'It took out the email,' said Henry.

Dr Bee grunted and reached for an olive. A medically recommended aid to digestion, which was getting upset with Henry's chirpiness.

'So you're out of touch with the world.'

'Yes,' said Henry. He beamed.

'Isn't that a problem with your vast literary network?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No. It's the solution.'

'The solution?'

'I'm writing again,' said Henry.

Dr Bee groaned. He deposited the olive pit at the side of his plate, and wondered again whether he wouldn't have felt better to have spat it out and shattered the plate and any adjacent piece of china like a NATO strike on a Serbian television station.

'Writing what?' Pawley asked.

'Words, words, words,' Dr Bee intoned.

'Volumes,' said Henry.

'But no emails,' Pawley persisted.

'No. No emails. It was the emails that were stopping me.'

'Really?' said Dr Bee, with sudden unfeigned interest. 'Tell us how. It might be something worth knowing.'

'They're an addiction.'

'An addiction?' said Pawley. 'Sounds good to me.'

'Absolute addictive behaviour,' said Henry.

'What happens is,' said Henry. 'you sit at the computer for a couple of hours answering emails and then you don't write anything. You've spent two hours on the keyboard, which gives you the

illusion of writing. You get the physical component without the substance. You think you've been writing. And in a way you have. Physically, that is.'

'I thought you wrote in longhand,' Dr Bee said.

'Sometimes,' said Henry. 'First draft.'

'So how could sitting at the keyboard sending emails provide a substitute activity for writing if the first draft is in longhand?'

'Keying it in,' said Henry.

'But that's only the second draft.'

'Second and third,' said Henry.

'Any advance on three drafts?' Pawley asked.

'So these keyed in drafts are what give the satisfaction,' said Dr Bee. 'Whereas the handwritten first draft offers no pleasure. Addictive or otherwise.'

'Oh, you're too clever for me,' said Henry.

'True,' Dr Bee agreed, 'but that doesn't answer the question.'

'The point is, I was spending all this time on the keyboard doing the emails. But it's trivia. Correspondence. Business. Gossip. And every day there are more messages, which you answer. And on it goes. And it's all quasi-literary activity. Emailing your agent. Your publisher. Sending out articles and stories you've already written. There's a sort of literary ambience. Your fingers on the keys. Your body thinks you've been writing. But it's a substitute writing.'

'Like methadone,' Pawley suggested.

'Precisely,' said Henry.

'Precisely,' said Dr Bee. 'Oh, how our language evolves and mutates.'

'Anyway,' Henry continued, undaunted, unstoppable, 'a spike through the modem fixed that.'

'Like a wooden stake through Dracula's heart,' offered Dr Dee.

'Precisely.'

'Precisely,' echoed Dr Bee.

'Three days after the email went down, I started writing again.'

'You were resurrected,' said Dr Bee. 'Like Christ emerging from the cave.'

'Precisely,' said Henry.

'Jesus,' said Dr Bee.

'I couldn't fiddle around all morning on the email any more. I was lost. And that's how I realised what had been happening.'

'So you were lost and found,' said Dr Bee.

'Born again,' Pawley offered.

'Yes,' Henry agreed, 'all of that. Yes, indeed. Before that, every morning, I'd open up the emails and answer them, some would be business, publishers, newspapers, Writer's Centre, some would be out of the blue, people getting in touch again and asking where to publish or something, asking for a reference, you know.'

'Not really,' said Dr Bee.

'It gave the illusion of keeping in touch.'

'Oh, touch,' said Dr Bee. 'Oh, the exquisite sense of tactility, oh if only it were so.'

'I thought it still was for you,' said Pawley. 'At least, once in a while.'

'Once in a while,' said Dr Bee. 'There you have it. Once in a while. In the vast vacuities of time.'

'Maybe you need to get onto email,' said Pawley.

'If I thought it would provide that satisfaction, I would.'

'Provide what satisfaction?' Henry asked.

'Touch, Tactility, Tangibility.'

'Flesh,' Pawley glossed.

'Flesh indeed. For a vegetarian you are surprisingly alert to the carnal.'

Pawley beamed. Dr Bee sighed.

'The incipient isolation of age,' Dr Bee said. 'My dentist told me a terrible thing.'

'Go on.'

'For some old people, visiting the doctor or dentist is the only social contact they have. They make an appointment simply for the sake of social interaction. They even have teeth extracted. Even if there is nothing wrong with them.'

'Except loneliness,' said Pawley, 'isolation.'

'Except loneliness and isolation.'

'What was wrong with you?' Pawley asked Dr Bee.

'Me? When?'

'When you visited the dentist.'

'Nothing.'

'Ah.'

'Routine six monthly check.'

'A sort of social call,' said Pawley.

'So we should learn to value our sicknesses,' said Henry. 'They give us the excuse to visit our doctor. They give us something to talk to our dentist about. Even if our mouth is full of metal probes and drills and irrigation tubes and we can only listen.'

'The nature of most social communication in our society,' said Pawley. 'Listen and keep silent.'

'You had a good chat?' Henry asked.

'Actually,' said Dr Bee, 'it was quite informative. He had been doing a course in forensic dentistry.'

'He thinks his patients are so old his next encounter with them will be a post-mortem?' Henry asked.

'Or is he gearing up for a wave of governmental anti-terrorist shoot-to-kill victims?' Pawley hypothesized.

'Or has he marked you down as a potential *crime passionel* subject? Nothing but your teeth left to identify you by?' Henry suggested

'And not many of them,' Pawley added.

'So,' said Pawley, tucking into his gnocchi pesto, 'no more emails.'

'Not in the morning,' Henry agreed.

He focussed on his garfish, removing the flesh, taking out the spine with its fine bones.

'Ah, like reading novels and watching television, to do the emails in the morning is somehow improper,' said Dr Bee. 'Immoral, even,' he added. 'You begin to make it sound appealing.' Gnocchi Romano for him. Give a man meat.

'The Thomas Mann principle,' said Henry. 'All you need to write is a couple of hours each day. But these need to be quality hours. First thing in the morning. Before you look at the mail or the newspapers. Or these days the email or the television news. You have to put things like email in their place.'

'Despite increasing loneliness and isolation, keeping in touch must take second place to literary production,' said Pawley. 'Is that it?'

'Art has its reasons but these are not the reasons of the heart,' Dr Bee suggested.

'And now you are lonely but creative. Isolated but prolific.'

'I don't know that I'm exactly lonely,' said Henry.

'Yes you are,' said Pawley. 'We all are. All lonely. All isolated. And it will only get worse. Until nothing remains but our teeth. And not many of them.'

'Self-imprisonment,' Pawley reflected, remorselessly.

'What is?' Henry asked.

'Most things,' said Pawley. 'Like self-censorship. We do it to ourselves. The instruments of control are internalized. We become our own jailers.'

'Yes, well,' said Henry, 'that's why I've stopped the email habit.'

'Or lightning stopped it for you,' Dr Bee emended. 'You do still distinguish between yourself and natural forces?'

'Of course.'

'Divine forces, too?' Pawley pressed.

'So now I am free,' said Henry.

'It makes no difference as far as I can see,' said Pawley. 'Being imprisoned for two hours a day on the email or being imprisoned two hours a day writing novels.'

'I know which I prefer,' said Henry.

'In so-called liberal democracies there is always the illusion of freedom of choice,' said Pawley.

'And what about the emails?' asked Dr Bee. 'Don't you still have to answer them? Or do you have a research assistant to do that for you?'

'You can be economical,' said Henry. 'Keep strictly to business. No rabbiting on.'

'You keep the rabbiting on for the novels?' Dr Bee inquired.

'You bet.'

'Not that you're not getting a readership, of course, just doing emails,' Pawley added. 'Someone out there's reading them, monitoring them, even if it's only an artificial intelligence.'

'What do you mean?'

'The internet was a military project from the beginning. It started out in the 1960s as MILNET. The US Defence Department funded it. If the CIA could use addiction as a way to control the blacks, why not use it to control writers? Get the blacks hooked on heroin and crack cocaine, get the writers hooked on email. Elegant solution, as those guys tend to say. And on top of that, everything the writers write on the email is monitored. And what they don't send through the email can be sucked out of their computers by spy-ware.'

'I don't know about that,' said Henry.

'Of course you do. You know it even if you want to deny it. Think yourself lucky. There's somebody out there reading everything you write, Henry, even if it never gets published. You're not alone. We're listening to you, as the telephone companies say.'

'It could be the plot of your next novel,' said Dr Bee, encouragingly. 'The one you haven't been able to write.'

'But I am writing now.'

'Well, the novel afterwards. Easy enough for someone as prolific as you.'

'I don't write science fiction,' said Henry, 'I write about now.'

'This is about now,' said Pawley.

'What you have to learn,' Pawley told Henry, drilling into him with an intensity greater than any visit to the dentist Henry had ever experienced, social contact or oral hygiene, 'what you have to learn is not to get carried away by email when you get back on it. It's not a private conversation. As if such a thing existed anyway.'

The waitress came over, to see if they needed more wine, more bread, who knew what she came over for. She was new and Dr Bee examined her with undisguised interest. Pawley waited till she went away.

'Email's not a private conversation, it's a public listening post. Someone starts a correspondence with you, innocuous little items, like what drugs are you on now, what do you feel about airport security checks, what do you think about the subservience of governmental foreign policy to American interests, don't do it, Henry. Don't respond. It's all monitored. And it's so easy for them to do. Much simpler than steaming open envelopes and photocopying letters. And whatever site you hit on the web, it's recorded.'

'More paranoia,' Dr Bee groaned.

'Not my paranoia. Just read the business pages of any newspaper. Apart from anything else, it's a commercial investment. Everything's recorded so they can profile your preferences.

Every supermarket purchase, every credit-card transaction, every hit on the internet. Then they sell the data onto other businesses that might be interested. Don't do it, Henry. Don't ever use the internet. Don't ever use Google. Google keeps records on every search your computer makes. They admit to keeping them for two years. It's big business. And you can be sure it's all recorded by the security agencies to see what topics you're nosing around in.'

'How can you be sure?' Dr Bee asked.

'Common sense,' said Pawley. 'Anyway, they can just buy the records from Google if they didn't happen to monitor something them themselves.'

'I hardly use the internet. Just email,' said Henry.

'Just as bad,' said Pawley. 'If you're going to use email, Henry, get a separate computer to write your novels on. One that's not on-line. A stand-alone. And if it's got a wireless facility, get that taken out. Physically. So they can't activate it by remote. Absolutely essential. And keep your subversive thoughts strictly to the stand-alone.'

'What subversive thoughts?'

'Your novels. They're not going to distinguish between your characters' subversion and yours. They see no difference.'

'That's just a failure to read correctly,' said Henry.

'Maybe,' said Pawley. 'Maybe they're right. From their point of view anything you write is something you thought and they don't care whether you approved it or not. No doubts. No irony. That's how they see it.'

'How?'

'As subversion. All of it. Incitement to terrorism.'

'How can my novels be an incitement to terrorism?'

'Any half-way serious account of contemporary capitalist society is an incitement to terrorism if you tell it like it is,' said Pawley. 'What's a computer cost, after all? Nothing compared with peace of mind. Get yourself a second one. Like a second set of books. Best business practice, as they say.'

'I don't see that it's necessary.'

'You want them hacking into your deathless prose, Henry? An uninvited on-line search of your lap-top? Fingers fiddling in your groin? Nothing easier. Checking out what you're thinking, writing. Altering a bit here, deleting a few lines there, wiping it all, out even.'

'Alter!' said Henry. 'They wouldn't do that.'

'They would and they do. And would you ever know? Do you ever read your own books once they're in print? Even you're not that desperately self-involved. They could alter the final draft after you'd made the final corrections and you'd never realize. They could even restore the original to your file, in case you looked it up. But they'll have intercepted the text between you and your publisher. Intercepted the final set of proofs and changed them.'

'I think it's most unlikely,' said Henry, a paler shade of pale. He never knew whether Pawley was just winding him up to amuse himself, or whether he believed all this stuff. Or was just trying it out, giving it voice to hear how it sounded.

Pawley shrugged.

'And don't make any jokes, either, Henry,' he advised. 'Not on the email nor on the phone. Transcripts are like Americans, they miss the irony. No jokes. No politically incorrect remarks. Don't even mention race or sex or drugs or what you're reading. It'll all come back to haunt you if you do. Someone will be told and you'll be screwed.'

'If only,' sighed Dr Bee.

'And Henry,' Pawley added.

'Yes,' said Henry, wearily.

'While we're on the topic -'

'Are we ever off it with you?' Dr Bee asked.

'No mobile phones, either. They've got a built-in tracking device.'

‘Right,’ said Henry.

‘And Henry,’ he came back again.

Henry grunted.

‘What about a web-site. Do you have one?’

‘I’m getting round to it,’ said Henry.

‘Don’t,’ said Pawley.

‘Don’t?’

‘You’ll only go and do something stupid. Post compromising photographs on it. List unwise translations. Write some self-incriminating blog. Apart from getting your readership, such as it is, targeted.’

‘What do you mean, targeted?’ Henry asked.

‘Anyone who hits on your web-site will be put on file for life,’ said Pawley.

‘Probably even get assassinated,’ Dr Bee elaborated, ‘thereby eliminating what small readership you used to have.’

‘It’s not that small,’ said Henry. ‘Anyway, that sounds ridiculous.’

‘Fact is stranger than fiction,’ said Pawley. ‘As you well know.’

‘And much more violent,’ Dr Bee agreed. ‘The web-site that kills. Theme for a novel, there, Henry.’

‘Not the sort of novel I write,’ said Henry.

‘You keep saying that,’ said Dr Bee. ‘A pity. I see movie potential. Television. Young flesh.’

He turned round in his seat to try and spot the waitress. She came over, all waitress allure, note-pad and pen in hand.

'That lightning strike,' Pawley resumed when she had gone for more wine, ' are you sure it was a lightning strike took out your email? Are you sure it wasn't spy-ware?'

'Spy-ware?' said Henry.

'The reader over your shoulder,' said Pawley. 'A program to monitor your computer activity. Probably just trying to get your on-line banking details. Have you checked your account? It hasn't been emptied?'

'I don't know.'

'Or whether they've been using your credit cards.'

'So not the NSA or ASIO after all,' said Dr Bee. 'Must be nice to know you have a wider range of readers than just that.'

'Nothing to stop the security agencies doing a few financial dirty tricks. Established practice. Put some hot money in your account and set you up as the financier of a terrorist cell.'

'I don't think that's likely,' said Henry.

'I do,' said Pawley. 'You're a prime target. Bleeding heart left liberal. Lots of foreign travel.'

'Conferences,' said Henry.

'Perfect cover,' said Pawley. 'You know, Henry, what I'd do to start with apart from getting the stand-alone computer, is give up on-line banking and get rid of your credit cards. Every transaction leaves an electronic trail. Whatever you buy - booze, health foods, prescription medicines, groceries, books - is all revealed. Where you eat. Then all they have to do is put a listening device at your regular table in your favourite restaurant, or send a spook along, someone who listens to what you say, engages you in subversive conversation. And there you are. Done.'

The new waitress came back.

Henry's reflex welcoming smile froze to ice even as he began smiling it.

'So, Henry, what will it be?' she asked.

'What you've got to realize, Henry, is that the cold war purges weren't designed only to purge communists any more than the terrorist scare purges are designed only to purge Islamic fundamentalists. They don't like them, of course, communists and fundamentalists, and they've got them in their sights. But what they're really aiming for are the people who object to the paranoia and hysteria, the people who are neither communists nor fundamentalists but who see that communists and fundamentalists and anti-Americans have a case. Which should be put. The people who believe in the discussion of ideas, they're the ones who are being targeted, Henry. People like you. People who are suspicious of the hysteria, of the bandwagon jumping, of the media hype. People who feel it's all basically part of a plot to take away our individual liberties. Which of course it is.'

'I see,' said Henry.

'And people like you have always been the target. People like you fail to flock along with Tuscan Bayes and Francesca Templar to join those organizations that denounce alleged human rights abuses in China and Burma and Russia and Cuba et cetera et cetera, while closing their eyes to the suppression of truth in our own society. The official lies disseminated by the media monopolies.'

'Well, thank you,' said Henry, modestly.

'Nothing to be grateful for,' said Pawley. 'In fact if I were you and I thought it was true, I'd be seriously scared.'

'I can't stand this climate of mistrust you attempt to create,' said Dr Bee. 'Look what you've done. You've even driven the waitress away.'

'I didn't create it,' said Pawley. 'I'm just warning Henry about it.'

'I wish you wouldn't,' said Henry.

'It's for your own good.'

'I sometimes wonder.'

'Well, that's a start,' said Pawley. 'Some healthy doubt at last. Instead of the old insouciant liberal goodwill towards the world.'

'It's all too depressing.'

'Actually,' said Pawley, 'in the end it isn't. It's a fascinating paradox. History shows they can blacklist you, close you down, stop you getting published, cut off your oxygen -'

'Cut off your oxygen?' Henry gasped.

'The oxygen readers provide. They can turn them off. But then they can't resist bugging you, finding out what you're writing, and then, there you are, you're being read again. The oxygen flow resumes.'

'But I don't want to be read just by spooks.'

'What do you care who it is? Who was ever able to choose their readers any more than they could chose their parents? It doesn't matter whether it's the Prince of Wales or the Director of the FBI.'

'I somehow doubt it would be either,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't really care who reads me as long as someone does,' said Henry.

'That's the point,' said Pawley. 'It doesn't matter who it is. As long as it's someone. Your thoughts are not inert, Henry. Someone is engaging with them. You remain intellectually alive.'

'Sounds pretty desperate to me,' said Dr Bee.

'These are desperate times,' said Pawley.

No one could deny that.

'But there's always hope,' Pawley persisted, his rural sojourns in new age territory having brought a new belief in the positive to his life. 'All this dependence on personal computers, on cyberspace, on the internet -'

'Alienation,' Henry intoned gloomily.

'Yes, without a doubt,' Pawley agreed. 'But things will change. In the end after spending so much time with digitalized information, screen, television, podcast, phone, and so on, actually to encounter living flesh will become quite erotic. People will start to touch each other on the arm or shoulder or cheek just to make a point. But really to check, is that reality I am seeing, touching, is that living flesh? The extreme abstraction and alienation of the internet will inevitably lead by the laws of dialectics to a renewed era of human touch. So there will be more avuncular arms around young nieces' shoulders.'

‘Lap-top dancing,’ suggested Dr Bee. He licked his lips and rubbed his hands by way of contributing some encouraging lubricious and lascivious items of body language to the discussion.

'I'm not sure I like that idea,' said Henry.

'It's not a matter of whether you like it,' said Pawley. 'It's the way it's going to be.'

'So boys,' said the new waitress coming back to them, responding to Dr Bee's solicitations, perhaps, who knows? 'What will it be now?'

7: Revenue Raising

Of the Director's preoccupations, the most prevalent and pressing was balancing the books.

'Balance?' said Henry. 'Let the national broadcaster worry about governmental demands for balance. I think we should accept any books donated to us. And buy anything else that we think is important. Forget balance.'

'What are you wittering on about, Henry?'

'The library.'

'I am going to cull the library,' she said.

'Cull it! Why?'

'It's a mess, there are books everywhere.'

'That's the point of libraries,' said Henry. 'It's their nature.'

'We've run out of space.'

'You can't cull books,' said Henry. 'They're an endangered species.’

‘Show me the preservation order on them.'

'Well, if they don’t have one, they should have,' said Henry. 'You can't get rid of books at a Writers' Centre. You're as bad as a publisher.'

'Meaning what, Henry?'

'Publishers have always been ambivalent towards books. At the very least. Often they positively hate them. They've even removed books from the name of their trade association. It's just called the publishers' association now, no long book publishers.'

'New media, Henry,' she said. 'The electronic age. And we have to get with it.'

'You're as bad as the university. They threw out thousands of books from the university library. And now they're doing it again. There was a stall inside the library with a sign saying Free Books last time I went in there. All the standard works of literary criticism. It was awful.'

'They were awful,' she agreed. 'I remember when you used to put them on those reading lists you handed out, and expected us to read them.'

'They should still be preserved,' he insisted.

'Not here,' she said. 'We have to throw them out, too. They're overflowing from the shelves. Somebody will trip over them and we'll have a court case. It's so untidy.'

'The bureaucrat's response,' said Henry. 'Tidiness over resources. Why don't we put in more shelves?'

'There's no wall space left.'

'Put shelves in the other rooms.'

'There's no security.'

'What does it matter? If people steal the books at least they'll be going to a good home. Somewhere where they're wanted. Loved and cherished.'

He let his mind lap round the thought, the writer's dream.

'Much better than burning them.'

'I was not going to burn them. I was going to cull them.'

'Cull, kill, burn, bury, what's the difference? Everyone's culling books.'

'So let's do it.'

'No,' he said. 'We have to resist the barbarism of the times. Put up more shelves.'

'I'll think about it,' she said.

'Please do.'

'I already said I would.'

'Thank you,' said Henry.

'But it would still help if you had a look along the shelves. You know what's worth keeping and what isn't.'

'Everything's worth keeping.'

'Everything, Henry?'

'Absolutely.'

'You don't think we have too many multiple copies of Tuscan Bayes and Francesca Templar?'

'I'll have a look,' he said.

She smiled winningly.

'Can we get onto the real issue, now?'

'The real issue?' said Henry. 'What is more real than preserving books?'

'Balancing them.'

'You already said that.'

'The financial books,' she said.

'Oh, them.'

'The real books.'

'Uh-huh,' said Henry. Dismissively. Uninterested.

'Good,' she said. 'Now I have your attention.'

Henry grunted and gazed out of the window at the magnolia blossom. How long till lunch, how long?

'Do I?'

'Do you what?'

'Have your attention.'

'Of course,' he said, turning to attend. 'All present and correct.'

'If only it were,' she said. 'We have a cash flow problem.'

His eyes wandered off again. He couldn't help himself. It was the same when he came to do his tax. The glazed gaze. The prevarication. The procrastination. The slipping away, mentally, emotionally, physically.

'We have to do something.'

'Fine,' he agreed, 'let's do it.'

She looked at him suspiciously.

'Do what?'

'Whatever you suggest,' he said.

'How about naming rights?' she said.

Henry groaned. 'We've been through that.'

'No we haven't.'

'I got defeated on calling us the House of Fiction.'

'You're always defeated, Henry.'

'No I'm not.'

'You said everything you ever tried proposing at university was defeated.'

'Oh, there,' said Henry.

'And how much happier a place the Writers' Centre is.'

'It is.'

'So why be negative?'

'I'm not negative,' he said. 'It was the committee that was negative. We've been all through that naming business and we set up a committee and they rejected the idea.'

'Not that sort of naming,' she said. 'I'm talking commercial sponsorship. Like the Booker.'

'The Man Booker,' he said.

'Yes. We could have an award. A competition.'

'We don't want to run competitions. They cost money and they just offend the people who don't win.'

'You speak from experience?'

'It would alienate the membership.'

'I'm not talking prizes,' she said. 'I'm talking naming rights.'

'Neon signs on the roof?'

'We'd need planning permission,' she said. 'But it's possible.'

'I hope not.'

'But we can name the rooms,' she said. 'Sell naming rights to the library.'

'Why stop at the library? Why not the cellar? The lavatories?'

'All of them,' she said.

Henry groaned. All that literary gent's dislike of commerce, that heritage of the aristocratic disdain for trade that writers had adopted from their patrons in the days when they had patrons and were not compelled to throw themselves before market forces.

'It's so seedy,' he said.

'Then it might produce a harvest.'

'Who's going to negotiate it?'

'Well, Henry, with all that under-utilized time on your hands -.'

He stopped himself delivering a rousing 'Never, never, never.'

'I don't think I'd be very good at it,' he said modestly.

'In that case,' she said, 'the next option is more workshops. The reality is -.'

He could feel himself slipping away again. Reality, what crimes are committed in thy name. Whenever he looked through the Centre's magazine, he shuddered. That recurrent nausea. Writers offering courses. How to succeed in writing without really trying. How to be an investigative journalist. Gay romance writing. Erotica for tiny tots. How could they bear to do it? To teach workshops, to enrol in them. Why didn't everyone just stay at home and write?

'Henry, you can keep those thoughts to yourself,' she said, after he delivered himself of them. He was never one to waste a thought.

'Workshops provide income,' she said. 'For the Centre, for the writers who teach the courses. It all looks good in the acquittal.'

'Acquittal? Have we been on trial?'

'To the Ministry and the Council,' she said. 'It's one of those things they like. Offering professional employment to writers.'

He shuddered. It sounded like forced labour camps.

'Arbeit macht frei.' he said.

'Exactly.'

'Why don't people just buy our books?' Henry asked. 'Then there would be no need for writers to teach workshops.'

'If we don't have more workshops and we don't sell naming rights, all that leaves is weddings.'

'Weddings? Do people still get married? I thought they all lived in sin, these days.'

'That was your generation, Henry. The new young today marry. They like ceremony. They love to come to our grounds.'

'Then there you are,' he said. 'No problem.'

'We need to provide more facilities to attract them.'

'Fair enough.'

'If we had a wedding celebrant, for instance.'

'Why not?' said Henry, insouciant.

'Would you do it?' she said. 'Really?'

She was all warmth and happiness and charm.

'Would I do what?'

'Become a wedding celebrant.'

'Are you crazy?'

'Alternatively, would you take the licensed premises bar management course?'

'Certainly not.'

'You were the one who insisted we had to get legal about serving alcohol.'

'That was just to keep you out of jail. It doesn't mean I want to serve it.'

'You just want to drink it.'

'In moderation.'

'There you are then. It doesn't pour itself.'

'There's no way I want to do a bar course. Or any course for that matter. Ever again.'

'When did you last do a course, Henry?'

'When I was a student.'

'That's back in pre-history. You need retraining. Urgently.'

'No way.'

'How can you start a new life in retirement without retraining?'

'I have a life.'

'Hardly,' she said. 'You'll just become another dithering old man if you don't keep your brain in training. I worry about you, Henry.'

'No need.'

'Maybe we should offer some retirement retraining workshops for retrenched old writers.'

'I was not retrenched. Nor am I retired. I no longer teach, that is all. I am a full-time writer.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'But you're certainly old, old boy.'

Henry glowered.

'Good old boy,' she said, more precisely.

'There is no way,' said Henry, pouring himself another glass of retsina down at the Greeks', 'absolutely no way that I am going to do a course in bar management.'

'Good one,' said Pawley. 'Why collaborate with repressive authority? Why should alcohol have to be licensed? Why should there be licensing laws? If we were in Greece, every restaurant would have its barrel of krassi from the proprietor's vineyard. Or his cousin's. Any corner shop would sell you a bottle. Or pour you one into a plastic mineral water bottle.'

'You feel the plastic improves the bouquet?' asked Dr Bee. 'You prefer a recycled container from a garbage bin? Is this place too fancy for you? Would you like me to ask them to remove the table-cloths?'

He turned towards the waiter. The waiter stood behind the bar and looked back suspiciously.

'I don't object to table-cloths,' said Pawley.

'Well, I suppose that's something we should be grateful for. I am in constant fear you will insist on lunch at Harry's Café de Wheels.'

'Not like it used to be,' said Pawley. 'Gone up-market.'

'Or perhaps the Our Lady of the whatever it is soup kitchen.'

'You want to try it some time?'

'Along with the homeless advocates of unlicensed drinking.'

'Actually,' said Pawley, 'most of the homeless lost their homes through gambling, not alcohol. And who runs the gambling? Who holds the casino licenses?'

'You feel gambling should be unlicensed and unrestricted?' Dr Bee asked. 'More homes on the market? Why not?'

Henry emerged from his introspective gloom. The view across Hyde Park was relaxing him. Looking down on the canopy of trees. The sense of being above it all. Like laughing gas, Pawley described it.

'She also suggested I should become a marriage celebrant.'

Dr Bee licked his lips.

'That sounds more like it,' he said. 'What does it involve. Do you get *droit de seigneur*?'

He dug into his moschári stifádo with relish.

'You'd have to perform gay marriages,' said Pawley. 'Not sure you'd want it.'

'I would refuse.' said Dr Bee. 'Against my religion. Leviticus xx 13.'

'Announce that in public and you'll be in jail,' Henry warned him.

'And there'll be lots of *droit de seigneur* going on in there in the showers,' said Pawley, averting his eyes from Dr Bee's dead calf and focussing on his own vegetarian stuffed tomatoes. Henry had chosen moussaka.

'She wanted me to draw up a program of suitable poetry to read at weddings.'

'Epithalamia,' said Dr Bee. The Hellenic ambience.

'More like verses for greetings cards,' said Henry. 'She wants to sell the cards and commission new poems.'

'Give it a go,' said Pawley.

'Certainly not,' said Henry. 'Anyway, I don't write poems.'

'You will,' said Dr Bee.

'What's all this about, anyway?' Pawley asked. 'Why does she want to do all this?'

'Money,' said Henry.

Pawley raised his glass to the light and looked at reflectively. Sun rays sparkled on it like morning in the Mediterranean in an earlier civilization. The music of Theodorakis spread across the tables.

'Why this obsession with money?' Pawley asked.

They looked at him in bemusement.

'You prefer to pay the bill with cowry shells?' Dr Bee asked. 'All that beachcombing has gone to your head.'

'I mean the Centre. Why should it have to make money?'

'To reduce our dependence on government grants,' said Henry. 'When it began it was one hundred per cent funded. Now we've got that down to forty per cent.'

'And is that good?'

'I would have thought so.'

'Why?'

'Why?'

'Yes, why?' Pawley persisted. 'Why does everything have to make money? Why is that the only criterion? What about service? What about utilities? Why should the telephone company and the water supplier and the national airline have to be profit making? Even William Randolph Hearst believed public utilities should be kept out of the hands of the robber barons.

'It's all drug money,' he elaborated. 'That's what the monetarist revolution was all about. All this drug money was swirling around with nowhere to invest. The chemical companies had already monopolized seeds. The supermarkets were already run by a handful of chains. Same with the media. Same with the motor industry and the aviation industry. It was all at the merger and take-over monopoly stage. No room for any new players. So they decided to privatize airlines and railways and telecommunications and water and transport to give the drug money bankers somewhere to invest their profits so they could make more even more money.'

'But you're in favour of drugs,' said Dr Bee.

The waiter replaced Theodorakis with rebetika.

'Certainly am,' said Pawley. 'Legalise everything. Grow your own. Cut out big business and usurers and other criminal elements. It would reduce the price and reduce crime. It would reduce the exorbitant profits, too, of course, which is why it isn't going to happen right now.'

'It's just the way things are,' said Henry.

'The way things have become.'

'Which is the way they are,' said Dr Be..

'They don't have to stay that way,' said Pawley.

'Perhaps,' said Henry. 'In the meantime while we await your revolution, we have to raise revenue to keep the Centre going.'

'Maybe,' said Pawley.

'Without a doubt.'

'Well, go for cigarette machines,' said Pawley.

'Cigarette machines?'

'You know, those things you put money in a slot and pull a lever and they dispense cigarettes, what do they call them?'

'Cigarette machines,' said Dr Bee.

'Not a hope,' said Henry.

'You already tried?'

'I suggested it because the committee members were always running out smokes. She said the members would object. The anti-smoking lobby.'

'Even if the committee approved?' said Pawley. 'More infringement of civil liberties by the Nanny state. Where is freedom of choice?'

'I thought you were a man of the left. Now you sound like a market economist,' said Dr Bee.

'You know for the cover of Sam Samson's collected poems, they whited out the cigarette he was smoking from the portrait they used? Same with Tom and Jerry cartoons. They've been going through them and removing all the cigarettes. It's like re-writing Shakespeare.'

'Shakespeare!' said Dr Bee.

'You survived your own heart attack but you're quite happy to encourage others to kill themselves, is that it?' Henry asked.

Dr Bee suggested if not cigarette machines, why not condom machines?

'All that young flesh waiting to write. Awaiting the touch of the master.'

'What young flesh? It's mainly pensioners.'

'We pensioners have our needs and desires,' said Dr Bee.

'And what touch?' Henry went on. 'Can't feel anything with condoms.'

'You would prohibit them on aesthetic grounds? Lack of tactility?'

'I'm not prohibiting them,' said Henry.

'How about funerals?' Dr Bee asked.

'Funerals?' said Henry.

'If you hire the place out for weddings, why not funerals?'

'Equal opportunity,' Pawley agreed.

'Marriages go in and out of fashion, but the market for funerals is constant.'

'It's growing,' said Pawley, 'now all the baby-boomers have reached retirement age.'

'There is a difference between retirement and death,' said Henry.

'Not a lot,' said Pawley.

'A Garden of Remembrance,' said Dr Bee. 'A little plot of consecrated ground beside the Centre. Or unconsecrated if you prefer. Where you could scatter the ashes of deceased writers. Or place them in urns. I see urns. Urn burial. Funerary reliques.'

He gestured at the amphora beside the bar.

'I don't know,' said Henry, looking away from it.

'If not a Garden of Remembrance, how about one of Sweet Forgetfulness? Perhaps preferable for certain of our national treasures. Your dearest and closest contemporaries. Tuscan Bayes. Francesca Templar. Scobie Spruce.'

Henry chuckled.

'Sweet and Sour Forgetfulness, perhaps,' said Dr Bee. 'More appropriate for the ambivalence one feels toward the dead. And a gesture towards our Asian neighbours.'

'It could be a money-spinner,' said Pawley. 'We could draw up an order of service. Not quite a State Funeral. But you could make something of it. Offer different plans, range of prices. You could provide epitaphs. Elegies. You could write and publish collections of suitable epitaphs for inscriptions. Have a couple of engravers on call. Stone-masons, too.'

Henry was reduced to silence.

'You look ashen,' said Dr Bee.

'Ready for the urn,' said Pawley.

The waiter came over to deliver his formal obsequies.

'Everything all right, sir? More wine?'

After that the ideas flowed fast and thick. Condom free, as Dr Bee explained, in deference to Henry.

'There's always gambling,' said Dr Bee.

'A casino license?' Pawley asked. 'Or were you thinking more along the lines of a two-up game?'

'A bridge team.'

'Daily poker sessions.'

'Like a Red Indian reservation,' said Dr Bee. 'Or you could have a wine club. Discount price for members. Henry's patronage alone should be sufficient to get it off the ground.'

'Conspicuous consumption,' Pawley agreed.

'The possibilities are endless,' Dr Bee enthused. Enthusiasm was so rarely come by these latter days. He called the waiter over and ordered baklava and Greek coffee and brandies all round. Pawley asked for ouzo.

'Cheer you up,' he explained to Henry. 'It's this talk of mortality. It casts a pall.'

'I am not depressed,' said Henry.

'You are, but you don't realize it,' said Dr Bee.

'False consciousness,' said Pawley with satisfaction. There was a use for the old terminology still. One day the revolution would return. And the urns would fly open. The ashes reassemble themselves into re-born activists. From the round earth's imagined corners rise. Rapture! He drank to it.

8: Henry's Body

'Take up golf,' they said. Both of them within the space of a week. The acupuncturist and the alternative healer. It was not the advice Henry had expected. Not from them. They were both

rather spiritual people. He would not have been surprised at being told to meditate. Make contact with your higher self. Even renounce the world. But golf. Shades of P. G. Wodehouse. It sounded disturbingly serious.

'You live too much in your head,' they said. Both of them. 'All those books, all that mental activity. You neglect the body.'

As if the head were not part of the body. But he knew what they meant. And indeed they were right. Not necessarily about taking up golf. But about living in his head and neglecting the body. That after all, he might have responded, was the nature of being a writer. That was why he had chosen to become a writer. His preoccupation had been with his body of work. And now his other body, his forgotten physical body, had suffered and rebelled.

'Sometimes,' an even older writer told him, 'the Lord sends us a warning.' He suggested Henry paid heed.

'Would you like to make confession?'

He was one of those writers who had been a seminarian. And jumped over the wall.

Henry declined. Dr Bee had warned him about the need to confess, shown in so many of their former colleagues. Maybe he felt Henry was prone to confession. So when asked directly, Henry managed to refuse. Reluctantly, was it? He no longer knew.

But he knew he took too little account of the body. When he began the first of the long round of visits to specialists, it became all too clear.

'Height?' the nurse asked.

'Five foot something. Can't remember. Eight, nine, ten?'

As an adolescent he had been tall. Too tall, gawky and gangling and awkward.

'He'll make six foot,' they said. Parents, relatives, neighbours. But he didn't. He stopped somewhere short of it. The first of many destinations never reached. So whatever he was, five foot eight, nine, ten, was a failure and he deigned not to remember it.

'Weight?'

'I've no idea.'

Henry wasn't someone who stepped regularly onto the bathroom scales. He had no bathroom scales. And anyway, he no longer knew the measurements. At school they had laboriously learned ounces, pounds, stones, hundredweights and their confusing abbreviations, ozs., lbs., cwts.

'What are these, then?' he asked, confronted by an arithmetical problem involving so many dozs. 'Dounces?'

Stark idiocy, or the beginnings of literary play, perhaps.

And then all that learning had been jettisoned in favour of whatever it was they were measured in now. He no longer know. Our bearings have been taken away from us, we are left powerless, disfranchised, innumerate. I am out of touch with the measurements of our time, as with so many other things, he reflected.

Including his weight.

The nurse looked at him oddly. He knew what she was thinking. He is out of touch with his body.

Alienation, they used to call it in the committed years.

After the nurse came the specialist. A non-alternative specialist. He looked like he might play golf, indeed. He read through Henry's details. Writer. The only thing Henry knew for certain.

And even that was beginning to look a bit uncertain.

'I always wanted to write,' the specialist said.

The gloomy room with its assorted browns, late 1940s end of the Raj furniture. The three-quarters empty bookcase with a few tattered directories of available drugs. The gleaming, vile, new machine uncomfortably amidst it all, high tech and alien, like an abandoned space ship from a distant planet. No abduction from here.

'I wanted to write medical novels,' said the specialist.

He ran the ultra-sound scanner over Henry's terrified frame. The roar of blood coursing through arteries and veins boomed into his ears. The sound of the body's processes left him quivering in horror. He tried to tell himself it was an electronic artefact he was hearing. Little green lights leapt from the screen before his eyes.

'But it's hopeless, of course,' the specialist went on. 'The demands of the genre are impossible. They insist on a happy ending. Healing and all that. Snatched from the jaws of the grave. Whereas' – he pressed the cold metal hard against Henry's non-resisting flesh – 'the reality is you get sick, suffer and die.'

Henry sickened, suffered. An out of body experience was imminent.

'So what's he expect me to do?' the specialist asked. His spotted bow-tie and his horn-rimmed glasses gave him the air of a French philosopher. Or an interviewer from the archaic early days of television.

'Who?' Henry whispered, from a great distance.

'This doctor fellow who referred you.'

'I don't really know,' Henry said. 'I suppose see what's the matter, see if anything can be done.'

'Oh, nothing can be done,' the specialist said.

The bow tie lit up in syncopation with the ultra-sound screen.

'And we know what's the matter.'

'Oh.'

'Would I have ever read anything you've written?' the specialist asked, sliding the scanner around on its revolting gel.

'Could have,' Henry said, but his voice exuded no confidence.

'What name do you write under?'

'My own.'

'Can't say I've come across it,' said the specialist. 'So many of you chaps around. What are you writing at the moment? If anything?'

'At the moment? Reviews, mainly.'

And not many of them.

'Reviews, eh? I love a good review. Takes me back to medical school. Cabaret. Chaps dressed up in dresses. Girls in dinner jackets and fish net stockings. Naughty songs. Political satire. Those were the days. What hopes we had then.'

'No, I meant book reviews.'

'Oh, them,' the specialist said. 'Never read them.'

'Can't say I do, either,' Henry said.

'Waste of everybody's time then, aren't they?'

'I suppose they are.'

'But there again,' said the specialist, 'what else is there to do with time? Just hang in there till the mortal blow.'

'I suppose so.'

'No doubt about it.'

The specialist went off to wash his hands. Little green lights flashed on the machine as before. Henry wondered if they flashed all the time, if there was any connection between his processes and its. Between his processes and anything. His awareness, for instance.

'Should I travel?' he asked.

'If you've got anywhere to go.'

'I mean, would it be best to wait for six months, or something?'

'Can't see why. Still going to be the same old body, isn't it?'

He ushered Henry out of the surgery and back to the reception desk. A sign proclaimed PLEASE SETTLE YOUR ACCOUNT BEFORE LEAVING. It sounded disturbingly metaphysical.

He stumbled out into the remorseless Australian sun, skin cancers rising from the flesh before his eyes, passers-by crashing to the ground from sun-stroke and urban pollution. He found the car park. HAVE YOU PAID AND DISPLAYED? Yes, I have displayed, now I am paying.

There were still the literary lunches. But they started off with a mineral water now. They spent a lot longer considering before they ordered the second bottle of wine. The coffee was decaffeinated and they had it less and less frequently. The drugs they compared notes on were beta-blockers and anti-coagulants and anti-cholesterol agents and anti-inflammatories.

If he had the choice he would probably do it all again, Henry decided. But he would have more consideration for the body and avoid stress. Try and accept that publishers and universities are the way they are and avoid confrontation. He didn't think he had gained anything from

confrontation. It was just the bad old machismo of the cadet corps and the playing fields, without any of the benefits of bodily exercise. These days he spent a lot of time avoiding stress. And when he felt unwilling or unmotivated to write, he no longer rolled a smoke and sat and thought about writing. Smoking was prohibited along with so much else. Now he would go for a walk and pump some blood through the dear old arteries. I am learning to think about the body lovingly, he told himself. Giving it some belated care and attention.

'Kayaking,' said the acupuncturist, 'how about kayaking?'

9: Grab Line

Henry sat at his desk with satisfaction. The novelist’s view. It cheered him. Boats going about their business. No longer did the noise of the outboard motors irritate him. He smiled at the yachts. No longer did they madden him as rich men's toys. He may not have been rich. Indeed, he wasn't. But he no longer resented the wealth of others. At least, not much. He had no wish to be on a yacht. He had done it once or twice. Spent hours on end exposed to the glaring sun and the chilling wind, damp and dirty, clutching the obligatory beer-can and ending up sore from sunburn, a headache from drinking, sodden from the salt spray. Not the life for him. Still, he was happy to see yachts sail past. And the kayaks, he was equally happy to see them, very colourful, though there was no way anyone was getting him out there paddling in one of them. But they all enhanced the view. Along with the garbage barges and the water taxis and the ferries. And the drug smugglers, no doubt Pawley would have insisted. Even the thought of Pawley no longer irritated him.

Henry was happy because he felt wanted. It was a new and welcome sensation. He glowed with the satisfaction of it. No longer was he superfluous man, supernumery fellow, dishonorary associate. After the university it was an extraordinary feeling. To be valued. To be consulted. To be rung up and asked to proffer advice. He had never realized how much advice he had stored away, desperate to be delivered. And it was welcomed. He could hardly believe it.

The Director would phone him from the Writers' Centre, morning, noon and night. And he did not object. He was the Chair and he was needed. He no longer resented phone calls as interrupting his creative labours. The creative labours putt-putted along at their own pace, no longer squeezed in between tutorials and seminars and syllabus meetings and planning meetings and all the rest of the time-wasting tedium of academic life. Not that that many creative labours were getting done. And it didn't worry him anymore. Much. Not much at all, only the occasional twinge once in a while.

'Henry, I need to consult you. I need your help,' the Director would say, at her most winning.

And she won immediately. It was no contest. He was all eager assistance. Mission statements. Corporate plans. Acquittals. All the bureaucratic lumber spewed out from American business schools and management consultants and foisted on public funding bodies. He became proficient in bureaucratese.

'I need a grab line,' she said.

'You've fallen overboard?' he asked. 'You need to be pulled ashore?'

'Ashore?' she said. 'What are you going on about?'

'Just looking at the yachts,' he said.

'Looking at what yachts?'

'The ones sailing past my window.'

Calm waters framed by spotted gums and casuarinas.

'Beautiful,' she said. 'The beauties of Sydney. So you're clearly under-occupied and need something to put your mind to.'

'I can't deny it,' confessed Henry, who in the past had always claimed the burdens of office or the privilege of the artist or anything else that came to hand in order to avoid any administrative chore.

'So put your mind to a grab line.'

'What's a grab line?'

'Something that gets them in.'

'Gets who in where?'

'Bums on seats to our workshops.'

'Like free admission?'

'I'm not sure free admission gets them in,' she said. 'People don't value things if they don't have to pay for them.'

'I do,' said Henry. ‘How about taking me to lunch?’

'Write me a slogan and we’ll see about it.'

'A slogan?' said Henry. 'Is that really necessary?'

'Yes.'

'Why is everything so crass?'

Being asked for advice did not preclude questioning. He was happy to be consulted; it did not prevent him from relishing debate.

'Why is everything so crass?' she repeated. 'That would be a good one. I'll make a note of it.'

'Feel free.'

'No, that's not appropriate for what we need now. We need income.'

'Do we really have to have one?'

'Yes. The Ministry insists. It's in their guidelines.'

'Is it?'

'I don't know, Henry. It's in someone's guidelines. Just come up with something.'

'You're as bad as a publisher.'

'You do say the nicest things.'

'They've started asking for things like that. Fatuous phrases to go on the cover of a book.'

'Then you know what's needed,' she said.

'Doesn't mean I can provide it.'

'You will.'

'Or believe in it.'

'Belief's not a problem, Henry,' she said. 'I'll take care of belief. Just write me a slogan for our banner.'

'For a banner!' said Henry. It wasn't even for an advertisement in the weekend papers. Keeping his name in print. Or at least his words. He had never written for a banner before. Or had he? Had he written political banners and now conveniently forgotten them?

'How about The Worst Thing Since Sliced Bread?'

'A bit negative,' she said. 'And not literary enough.'

'How about a quotation?'

'Go on.'

'Things fall apart, the Centre cannot hold.'

'Perhaps not,' she said.

'Something from the Bard?' Henry suggested.

In these days of cultural degradation at the hands of advertising agencies, management consultants and critical theorists, Henry still tried to hold on to the literary tradition.

'Why not?'

'It doesn't matter that he was a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant?'

'I thought he was supposed to be a Roman Catholic these days,' she said.

'Still a dead white male.'

You never knew what might be in the guidelines.

'Try me, anyway,' she said.

'Kill him for his bad verses,' Henry offered,

'Still a bit negative,' she said.

'Really? Sounded pretty positive to me,' said Henry.

'The Poets' Union might object.'

'Words, words, words,' said Henry.

'Keep going,' she said, 'you'll get there.'

'A tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.'

'I don't think so but I'll note it down.'

'The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact. One sees more devils....'

'Stop,' she said. 'That's it.'

'It goes on....'

'No, that's enough, she insisted. 'It's got to fit on the banner. Can you tighten it up a bit? Make it a bit more -'

'Compact?'

'Yes,' she said.

Henry tightened up the Bard a bit. Brought him into sound bite territory. All compact.

'Lunatics, lovers and poets,' he offered.

Lunatics, Lovers and Poets it was.

The downside of retirement was the difficulty of finding anyone to have lunch with. In the latter days of employment there had usually been someone willing to escape from the campus confines and go out in pursuit of a better life. But now Henry had left, his cronies had left too, and there was nowhere they spontaneously met, nowhere they gathered with a shared desire for a bit to eat, a couple of bottles, reasonable conversation, a relaxed meal.

It was in pursuit of companionship and delinquency that Henry strolled through the old asylum grounds to the Writers' Centre. He called out lordly greetings to the Criminal, who waved back acknowledgement from behind his computer, diligently doing his community service. A nice day for day-release. Before more could be said, the Director rose up, incandescent with rage.

'Henry!' she shouted.

'Frau Direktor,' he smiled back.

'I could kill you,' she said.

The Criminal looked up and waited.

'Not the greeting I was expecting,' Henry said.

'You're lucky you get any greeting. You're lucky I don't have you manacled in irons and marched off the premises.'

'Better than taken down the cellars,' said Henry.

The Criminal chortled quietly and returned to his screen. Henry had speculated that he spent his days studying on-line pornography, but the Director had said that revealed more about Henry's sad old man's preoccupations than her carefully selected employees' habits, squeaky clean, all of them.

'What have I done to deserve this?' Henry asked imperturbably, why would anyone say they wanted to kill him other than in jest?

'That stupid slogan,' she said.

'Lunatics, lovers and poets?'

'Don't even say it,' she shrieked. 'Don't ever mention it again.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'What's wrong with it? Everything's wrong with it. I've had the Ministry on the phone all morning. We're lucky they haven't closed us down. They were all ready to evict us from the building.'

'I said grab lines were a silly idea,' said Henry.

'There is nothing wrong with grab lines. Except that one.'

'So what's the problem?'

'The Minister was furious. He insisted we got rid of it.'

'Ah, so the Ministry of the Arts really is an arm of government control. Pawley always said it was. Censorship under another name. They would proscribe the language of Shakespeare.'

'Not the Ministry of Arts, the Ministry of Health,' she said.

'What's it got to do with them?'

'In case it had slipped your notice, we are in the grounds of a hospital.'

'A mental hospital,' Henry agreed.

'And you go and put lunatics in the grab line.'

‘Well, a lunatic asylum,’ Henry began.

‘Don’t ever call it that.’

'Really? I thought it was appropriate.'

'Appropriate?'

'Apposite.'

'Apposite?' she choked. 'Apposite! It was downright offensive. Are you mad?'

'Am I a lunatic, you ask?'

'There you go again,' she said.

'Offensive?' Henry pondered. 'Who did it offend?'

'The patients. The staff. The Minister. You can't go around calling people lunatics these days.'

'I wasn't calling anyone a lunatic,' said Henry. 'Not even the Minister. I was just adapting the Bard. Tightening him up a bit, as you requested.'

'You're an idiot,' she said.

'Is it all right to call someone an idiot?' he asked. 'Idiots, lovers and poets. Is that better?'

'You breached the guidelines.'

'Where are these guidelines? Where is the book that lists all the forbidden words? It could be a best-seller: everything we're no longer allowed to say. I didn't say madwomen, I might point

out,' Henry pointed out. 'There was nothing gender specific. Nothing to come under the offences against women. Nothing against ethnic minorities. Nothing irreligious. Doesn't insult Islam. Nothing anti-Semitic. Wouldn't offend the elders of Zion.'

'Well, you practically got us disestablished. I've had to write grovelling apologies. I've had to reprint all the flyers. I've had to pull down the banner and cut out the word.'

'Which word?' Henry asked, all innocence.

'Lunatics, you maniac,' she said.

'So it's Maniacs, Lovers and Poets now, is it?'

'No it certainly isn't. It's just Lovers and Poets. And it looks a mess.'

'It misses the point,' said Henry.

'Good,' she said, 'that is the point. You can't go around referring to lunatics in a mental hospital.'

'I assume you speak in jest.'

'I do not speak in jest, Henry, and you jolly well know it.'

'Is this an official decree of political correctness?'

'Yes.'

'You're joking.'

'I am not, and if I thought you did this whole thing deliberately - '

'You'd give me a lobotomy.'

'These are not laughing matters.'

'Clearly not.'

'What did you think you were doing?'

'Think?' said Henry. 'I was merely following your instructions to write a grab line.'

'You did it deliberately.'

'Well, I admit I did give it some thought. A literary context, since this is supposed to be a Writers' Centre. Maintain the literary tradition.'

'You were deliberately causing trouble.'

'Not at all.'

'Yes, you were.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because you were defeated over the name change.'

'What name change?'

'Your attempt to call us The House of Fiction.'

'Oh, that,' said Henry. 'I would have settled for Chateau Roman.'

'And when you didn't get your way, you set out deliberately to embarrass me.'

'Not at all.'

'I don't believe it.'

'The story of my life,' said Henry.

'The story of your wretched novels,' she snapped

'I say,' said Henry, 'what's that supposed to mean?'

'Unbelievable,' she said.

Defame a fellow's fiction. But he refused to take offence. Keep it all good spirited.

'I think it's rather funny,' he said.

'Get out,' said the director.

'Irony,' said Henry, backing out. 'If we were to remove the ironic potential from everything we said, where would be the joy in language? We would end up like North Americans.'

He reached the door and smiled his farewell.

'Maybe we should call the place The House of Mirth,' he offered as a parting sally.

The *Who's Who of Australian Writers* crashed into the door.

'Or The Jolly Corner,' he added, poking his head round it.

The *International Who's Who of Writers* followed.

Ah well, both volumes were out of date. He had been pressing her to get new editions for some time. Looked like now she would have to. Maybe she already had. Amazing how everything turned out for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

He got into his car and drove off through the palm-lined avenues for a solitary lunch. At the entrance to the grounds a tattered banner hung limply. A large section had been torn from it. What was left proclaimed Lovers and Poets. It was a mistake, he conceded. Once again the poets were the ones who survived.

10: The Mower Now Commands the Field

Henry eased himself slowly onto the restaurant chair. He grimaced. He groaned. Dr Bee and Pawley watched him with interest. A fellow sufferer. Pleasure in another's pain.

'Lumbago?' asked Dr Bee. 'Gout? Some painful manipulation at the Writers' Clinic?'

'Grass,' said Henry.

'Grass?' said Pawley. 'I find it's a pain reliever. They even prescribe it now for multiple sclerosis sufferers.'

'Not that sort,' Henry snapped, irritably. Pain made him irritable. 'Mowing.'

'Mowing?' said Dr Bee. 'The grim reaper? Time's scythe slashing at your hairy heels?'

'Lawns,' said Henry.

'Forest Lawns?' Dr Bee offered.

'Lawn bloody mowing,' said Henry.

'Really?' said Dr Bee. 'I am pleased to say I have never mown a lawn. Nor owned a lawn-mower.'

He glowed with the self-satisfaction of one who had never been suburban man.

'Whipper-snipper? Brush-cutter?' Pawley asked.

'Never,' he said, even more superciliously.

'Wife insisted,' said Henry.

'Ah,' said Pawley. 'Women and lawns. They have an obsession about them. The clean-shaven look. Not for them the fashionable stubble of male models, rent boys and Hollywood. It has to be the smooth enamelled green beloved of the ancient poets. Manicured is how they like it. They have this killer instinct where grass is concerned. The Lord put enmity between them. Any sort of grass,' he added reflectively. 'I know from bitter experience.'

'So do I,' said Henry.

'Nothing like mine,' said Pawley.

Pawley and Henry looked at each other, old gents hovering uncertainly before a revolving door, after you old chap, no after you.

Henry reached for the bottle of house white. Pawley seized the opportunity.

'Grass only needs to be cut when women are around,' said Pawley. 'Stay cool. Let it grow.'

'She's always around,' said Henry.

'Get a second home.'

'Of course,' said Henry. 'I should have thought of that. How silly of me. I'll make a note to do it tomorrow.'

'Mind you,' said Pawley, 'once I'd got the place up the coast, I had to keep the grass cut because of the snakes.'

Basking on the door-step in early summer. Drawn out by the warm weather. Brown snakes. Black snakes. Red bellies.

'Dangerous little critters. Kill you as soon as hiss at you. Much like women.'

'I do not have snakes,' said Henry.

'Every paradise has its snakes,' said Pawley. 'Even suburban ones. Snakes and Eves. They go together. It's the Eves of course that are the problem. Women hate grass. Afraid of the serpents lurking there.'

He poured himself a drink since Henry hadn't offered.

'Madeleine reckons long grass encourages mosquitoes. Breeds them, probably. Endless asides on being eaten alive by mosquitoes from the uncut grass. Phobic, of course. I understand that. But you've just got to be relaxed about it, recognize it as phobic. Re-program yourself. Learn to love your lawn. Give grass a chance.'

'And you do, I'm sure,' said Dr Bee.

'I used to let it alone,' he said. 'Used to like the jungle effect. Gave a sense of security. Protection. An illusion, of course. Thought it was security and all the time it was harbouring snakes. But then, isn't it all illusion?'

'Speak for yourself,' said Dr Bee.

'It was great,' said Pawley. 'Wild raspberries started growing. Took over the slope, great. Then I let the rest of it alone and wild strawberries appeared. Amazing. Took me back, man. Remember Ingmar Bergman, all those movies?'

'The Seventh Seal,' said Dr Bee. 'Time with his scythe.'

'I just let it grow till Madeleine came up,' Pawley went on. 'Don't mow till women arrive is my advice. They complain. Then you say, I'll mow first thing in the morning. Let them see you doing it. Makes you look virtuous. Cut a track to the washing line. Another to the compost heap. Heroism. Then they're grateful. You've saved them from getting ticks or leaches or snake bites. You gain merit.'

'I thought you said you had a bitter experience,' Dr Bee reminded him.

'Ah, well,' said Pawley, 'I made an error of judgement.'

'Not like you,' said Dr Bee.

'Can happen to anyone,' said Pawley. 'I thought I'd gain extra merit. She was doing her exercises. You know. Those things women do. Yoga. Tai-chi.'

'Martial arts,' said Henry.

'Exactly. So I figured if I mowed up and down outside the window, sweat pouring off the brow, calluses swelling on the horny hands, she'd be impressed. And you know, taking exercise, too. She's always going on about how I should take exercise. It's a drag, but you tell yourself it's

good for the upper body. Like hanging out the washing on the clothesline. Gain merit with your acupuncturist. Better than taking up golf or kayaking.'

'And was she impressed?' Dr Bee asked.

'Up to a point,' said Pawley. 'Heart pounding, eyes popping, motor raging. Honest labour. Like a Brueghel peasant.'

'And?' Dr Bee persisted.

'Yeah, well, I got carried away. I started to ham it up a bit. More Hieronymus Bosch than Brueghel. Like those old zap comix. Mr Natural. R. Crumb. That's when she realized.'

'Realized what?' Henry asked.

'That I was stoned.'

'Aren't you always?'

'By preference,' said Pawley. 'But like I said, women are down on grass. She came out like an avenging angel. Demanded to know.'

'Know what?'

'Was I stoned?'

'And you said?'

'Not particularly.'

'And that was a satisfactory answer?'

'Not to her,' said Pawley. 'She went ape. Said I'd been invaded by entities. Said I need to be cleared of them.'

'Exercised then exorcized?' said Dr Bee.

'And the rest of it. Chants. Mantras. Gongs. Incense. Space-clearer. Psychic healing. Heavy stuff, man. A complete debriefing. It was like I'd got a computer virus. Did I ever get the

treatment. Full system scan. Quarantine. Hard disk stripped down. Rebooting. The lot. Shit. Not worth it. Now I do what she says.'

'You gave up grass?' said Henry in surprise.

'No, man. Gave up mowing. Got an agency to come and do it. It's only money. My money. But you've got to spend it while you can, she reckons. Who knows? So we spend it. Might as well. What's with this society? Can't drink and drive, can't smoke and drive, can't go out and get pissed or stoned, can't smoke at home, can't drink at home. Is this a life? What happened to us? Where are our joys and ancient liberties?'

He reached for the bottle again. Henry had emptied it. Pawley gazed at it, held it up to the light reflectively.

The waiter came over.

'Same again?'

'Let's go up a notch,' said Pawley. 'Never know how long we've got.'

They went up a couple of notches. Vernaccia di San Giminiano.

'And you gave up smoking?'

'Had to anyway,' said Pawley. 'After the heart attack. Toxins in the smoke inflame the arteries.'

'How do you manage without?' Dr Bee asked.

'Eat it,' said Pawley. 'Wait till she's gone out and open the windows and cook up a bit. Got to heat it before you eat it. That's the only catch. Heat releases the THC. But it lasts all day that way. Much more economical, in fact. You only need the equivalent of a joint. Whereas in the past I'd've smoked ten or twelve.'

'And the rest,' said Henry.

'Fifteen, maybe,' Pawley conceded.

'In the good old days,' said Dr Bee.

'Where are they now?' asked Henry, hollowly.

The waiter came back with the wine for their approval. Pawley nodded to him to open it. Sniffed it, tasted it, approved it.

'Things aren't so bad,' he said, taking a decent swig.

Henry rearranged some limbs and groaned in dispute.

'Hire an agency,' Pawley advised him.

'Escort agency?' Dr Bee inquired.

‘Whatever your needs,’ said Pawley. ‘Make hay while the sun shines. All flesh is grass, after all.’

11: The Invitation

Henry's plan, like so many of his plans, could hardly have been called a plan at all. It was more like a delicate reverie, floating in a bush-fire haze above the eucalyptus-shrouded mountains, eagles languorously circling in the thermals, waiting their moment. An opium trance, Pawley would have described it, yet lacking the material base of opium. And lacking, too, any strong wish or desire to see it brought to fruition. This is the autumn of my life, Henry reflected, why am I so little preoccupied with fruition?

'Aren't your novels fruity enough?' Dr Bee asked.

Of course, the novels. He had tended to think of them as his children: his orphan children, perhaps, cast out into the world and neglected: cast out in the hope that others would value them

and nurture them and write critical articles about them, full of praise and admiration. But he could just as readily see them, the novels, as fruit. Less painfully. To see abandoned offspring might tug at the heartstrings, whatever heartstrings might be. But fruit. Could you get emotional about scattered and abandoned fruit? Anyway, these days you could always hire some guest workers to harvest fruit. Pacific islanders brought up on a diet of Robert Louis Stevenson. It was not as if they were going to rot on the branch.

His plan, anyway, such as it was, was to give as much time as was left to him to writing. No more sad contagion of the gown. No more lectures. No more classes. No more teaching.

However, and this was the pseudo-plan, or sub-plan, or Ur-plan, the vague idea, at least: at some point in this relaxed future he might consider a visiting lecture here, reading from his works there, maybe even a visiting appointment, if it were sufficiently lucrative or prestigious.

When the offer came he was stricken sick. A pit opened in the pit of his stomach. It was worse than heartburn or reflux or alcoholic gastritis. He knew all of them. The literary life had required its ration of retching. But this was of a different order. This was a chasm of fear. Writer-in-residence for six months. In the States. And then the killing thrust of the knife in the belly. Six hours of classes a week.

To the uninformed, the inexperienced, the average thirty-five to fifty-five hour a week wage-slave, six hours might not have sounded much. To Henry it sounded like a death knell. He knew it was something he could never do again.

'Again?' said Dr Bee, 'When did you last teach six hours a week?'

Henry waved the comment away, batting off an irritating midge or fly.

'Four, five, six, what’s the difference? The past is not the point. The point is the future.'

'Your life has no present?' Pawley asked, smugly metaphysical.

'Present, future, what's the difference?'

'Clearly none at all,' said Dr Bee. 'Let us abolish the differentiation of tenses along with gender.'

'The point is,' said Henry, 'I realized I couldn't do it.'

'I wouldn't want to go to the States either,' said Pawley.

'It wasn't a matter of it's being the States.'

'It should be,' said Pawley. 'It would be for me. Think if you said anything.'

'Said anything?'

'About its imperial wars: Korea, Vietnam, Granada, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Georgia, Pakistan. You'd be shot. At least if you say anything here you only get blacklisted or interned without trial. There they'd just take you out and kill you. Drop you from a helicopter over the ocean.'

'That's South America,' said Henry.

'North American helicopters,' said Pawley. 'North American military advisers. North American training programs.'

'I've never heard of it happening in the States,' said Henry.

'Well, you wouldn't, would you? Anyway, you might be lucky. An endless summer holiday in old Guantanamo Bay. Or maybe they'd ship you off to a CIA prison in Romania. You wouldn't survive a week.'

'I wasn't worried about that aspect of it.'

'You should be. With your liberal humanist propensity for fellow-travelling and loving the underdog. You're precisely what they’re gunning for.'

'What are these underdogs?' Dr Bee asked.

'America's enemies,' said Pawley.

'The underdogs of war,' Dr Bee scoffed.

'Precisely,' said Pawley.

'It was just the thought of teaching,' said Henry. 'All those bland fatuous faces, sucking your psychic energy out of your solar plexus. I could feel it.'

Dr Bee and Pawley fell silent. They could feel it too. Not only Henry's anguish but their own cell memories, their own experience. It was their own fear Henry confronted them with.

'I take your point,' said Pawley at last.

'I still have nightmares,' Dr Bee confessed. 'The same nightmare every time. I dream I've gone back onto campus. An attendant says, "You'd like to see your old room, sir." Takes me along. Big bunch of jangling keys. Opens the door to my room. It's totally empty. Empty bookshelves. No desk. No chairs. And then, as I'm standing there, attendants start bringing in the desk. The chairs. Telephone. Telephone directories. And the students start coming in and sitting on the chairs and unwrapping their sandwiches and sucking up their soft drinks through their straws and I'm stuck there. And I've got nothing to say. I can't think of anything. I try to speak and nothing comes out.'

He fell silent, in replication of his dream role.

'And what happens then?'

'I don't know. Something awful. All I know is I wake up screaming. Dripping with sweat. Shaking with terror.'

'I remember that,' said Pawley.

'It's my dream,' Dr Bee snapped, 'how can you remember it?'

'I don't know. But I do. Sounds like the last ten years before I left. Every class a nightmare.'

'So you see why I felt like I did,' said Henry.

But they didn't. They sat there in dumb reflection, too caught up in their own private hells to spare a thought for Henry.

'So you didn't take the job.'

'No.'

'So what did they do? Offer it to someone else?'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'Go on then.'

'Go on where?'

'Who did they offer it to?'

Henry clenched his teeth and swallowed and then swallowed again. It was as if he were playing charades. My lips are sealed. My mouth refuses to open.

'Anyone we know?'

'Oh God,' Henry groaned. 'That dreadful little moll Francesca Templar.'

'Not our one time writer-in-residence?' Dr Bee said. 'She of the blonded thatch and ripping bodice?'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'How did you find out?' Pawley asked. 'Did she write and tell you?'

'Yes.'

'She didn't!' said Pawley.

'She did indeed. She emailed me that she'd been approached about it. Thought I might care to write a testimonial for her. Not that she needed it, she said. But it might be a way, she suggested, to throw my hat in the ring and then they might toss some part-time work my way. One day.'

'Nice of her.'

'Condescending little tramp,' said Henry.

'And did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Write in support.'

Henry did his humming and hah-ing routine. The academic sound bite for when nothing could be said.

'You can tell us,' said Dr Bee, 'you're among friends.'

'How could I not?'

'Not tell us?'

'Not write it.'

'So you did.'

'Did what?'

'Write in support.'

Henry's teeth clamped shut, his lips tight pressed together. He nodded.

'Was that a yes?' Dr Bee persisted, like some friendly questioner in Abu Ghraib.

Henry nodded again.

'Surprised you didn't write back and say you'd take the job after all, just to spite her.'

'I certainly thought of it,' Henry confessed.

'But you didn't.'

'Well,' said Henry.

'You can tell us,' said Dr Bee.

'Well, actually, yes, I did.'

'And?' said Pawley.

'I said plans had changed and I was now available.'

'And they said?' asked Dr Bee.

'Forget it,' said Henry.

'In as many words?'

'Pretty much. They said they'd made an appointment and were supremely happy with it.'

'And you said?'

'I didn't say anything,' said Henry. 'How could I?'

'No, you couldn't,' agreed Dr Bee.

'So I didn't,' said Henry.

'Sound policy,' said Pawley.

Henry shook his head wearily.

'I couldn't, could I? Could I?'

They shook their heads in unison.

'No, you couldn't,' said Dr Bee again.

'No,' Henry agreed, 'no, I couldn't.'

12: Advice to Young Writers

'Henry,' said the Director, schmoozing up to him out at the Writers' Centre, 'why don't you give us a column?'

The Criminal sniggered suggestively behind his screen of on-line pornography. Day release and community service. Nice work if you can get it, Henry reflected.

'What sort of a column?' Henry asked nervously.

'Something long and firm,' said the Criminal.

'You know,' said the Director, 'your thoughts on writing. How to do it.'

The Criminal sniggered some more.

'You know so much, Henry. You've had so much experience. All those books.'

'Well, I have written a few,' said Henry.

'I meant all those books you've read,' said the Director. 'But the ones you've written, too, of course. Naturally. All those years teaching at university.'

They flashed past his eyes again. All those years. Teaching callow youth instead of writing more novels.

'Give us the benefit of your experience, Henry,' she cooed.

The Criminal cackled in counterpoint.

'We'll run it in the magazine,' she said. 'Every month. With your photo,' she added, as an incentive.

'Full frontal,' said the Criminal.

'How long a column?' Henry asked.

'Oh, you know. Whatever it takes.'

More grunts from the Criminal.

'A regular feature?' he said. Just checking.

'Yes.'

He was tempted. As she knew he would be, all the wiles of Eve in her DNA. And Henry stock still there like yet another Adam, man of clay, so easily moulded.

He could see it. The photograph. The by-line. The page of type. Each month. It fitted in with his fantasies of the Higher Journalism. No more Lit. Crit. But in between the bouts of fiction he liked to write something different. It had always been the way he had worked, turning to Lit. Crit. when the fiction dried up, returning refreshed to fiction when the Lit. Crit. bogged down. Perhaps this was what he needed to get the fiction flowing again. He'd been slowing down, despite the freedom of early retirement. He had expected to write more with all that time on hand. But perhaps he needed the stimulus of the other, the reflective literary opinions to balance the creative moments, the variety, the alternatives. And it needn't mean a lot of work. He could recycle some of the talks he'd given at writers' festivals and never got around to publishing. Those book launch speeches. Rescued from oblivion and restored to print. It wouldn't be too demanding. And it would give him a regular spot. Who knew, he might be able to translate it into the national press if it worked. Once he'd got into the rhythm of it. Developed an audience. Created a demand. Become a public intellectual. Nice work if you can get it, Henry reflected yet once more.

'Why not?' he said.

Henry had been brooding on his Advice to Young Writers for some time. Mistakes to avoid. How not do it. The bitter fruit of long experience. His contribution to the teaching of Creative Writing.

He would lie in bed in the morning, or evening for that matter, and often in the middle of the night, recollecting the details, the wrong turns, missed opportunities, ill-judged moves. He had held off writing it since he could think of nowhere he could publish it. But now there was his column. What better place? It was perfect. And so would his advice be. Perfect. A latter day Polonius.

The first point was a variant on the 'whatever you say, say nothing' of the Irish proverb. The emphasis here was on say. Do not, Henry advised, go around declaring your views in public, especially if your views are in any way challenging. Challenging meant subversive, these days. And wasn't that the point of writing, to be subversive? Of course, by giving this advice he was disregarding its message: but it was too late anyway to be cautious. Too late for Henry. Others would benefit from his mistakes, however.

It wasn't, he stressed, a matter of saying nothing in your writing. There were novelists who scrupulously achieved that, international prize-winners like Tuscan Bayes. Indeed, if you wanted international fame and accolades it was best to have no identifiable opinions, unless they were conformist ones. That a writer should not express opinions was the received wisdom of conformity. But Henry took pains to explain that that was not what he meant.

He stressed, rather, that if a writer had beliefs and opinions, political and religious and moral values, and what was the point of being a writer if you didn't have beliefs and values in those areas, then keep their expression to the fiction or poetry or plays. Don't go declaring them in interviews and manifestoes and statements to the press. Always be bland in your public role, he advised. Never say what your politics are, never express your doubts about the reality of the terrorist threat or your horror at global capitalism. Keep that for the novels.

The point being that nobody much ever read the novels, not with any care and attention. But the public declarations in the press were widely read by those who could not be bothered to read novels, by the political classes and by those employed to monitor opinion and dissent. *La police des Ecrivains*. It was those public statements that got you into trouble, got you knocked off short lists and put on blacklists.

Use your art, Henry advised. Sententiously, yes. The column brought out his sententiousness. An elderly man of letters. Well, less elderly than senior. Maybe not even senior, senior too readily evoked senior citizen. Distinguished, then. Anyway, the reason fiction evolved was to express truths that could not be safely expressed in any other way. Write history and you would be dragged before tribunals, star chambers, inquisitions. Write in pamphlets and newspapers and your views would get you into the stocks, your ears clipped, your hand lopped off. Assuming they were inconvenient views you expressed, that is, but what is the point of expressing any other views? So, keep them for the books.

Next, he inscribed, avoid making enemies. The idiots who are your contemporaries will be your contemporaries all your life, carried along the same current, inseparably. You are all at the same point on the great river of time. The stream carries you along together, like it or not.

Years of lecturing had taught him to say everything three times. The importance of repetition in oral delivery. After triple iteration, an idea would finally take hold. It was a useful technique, for lecturing or the column. Filled out the space. Like the old penny a word days: the more words the more pennies. Dollars, these days. From pennies to dollars. How long he had lived!

So, he advised, do not abuse your publisher's editor. Do not shout down the phone at the sales manager. Never start a feud with a fellow writer. Be bland and loving, genial and polite, a

private person of inexhaustible charm. Because, if you offend your publisher or your editor, she will be an enemy for life. And if you offend a dozen publishers, something easily done in Henry's experience, all too easily done and not without reason nor indeed without moral right on your side, if you do that you will end up without anyone to publish you. There is no second set of books outside of accountancy. There is no other world you can turn to. There is no accessible parallel universe. This is the one you are in and these are your colleagues and peers and contemporaries. So smile at them and shut up.

Do not denounce the iniquities of globalized media conglomerates. Do not condemn the reactionary agendas of the national press. Say nothing, write your books and articles, slip in as much subversion as you can get away with, and smile.

Henry smiled. If only. If only he had been given this advice when he had set out on his career. Took the first faltering steps on a steadily downhill path.

Should I go on, or have I said enough? he asked himself. Milton. Yes, well, Milton said quite enough and was lucky to escape with his life after the collapse of the English republic. His books were burned. Only his blindness saved him.

But then, wasn't there something glorious about such principle?

Maybe he had said enough. Enough for one column. One of those columns you tugged on like Samson, and ended up bringing the house down on your head.

So be it, Henry reflected. And so it was.

It was a fine morning. No clouds in the sky. No noticeable humidity. No perverse wind. Henry walked into the Writers' Centre relaxed, ready for lunch. Stacked on the edge of the Director's

desk was a generous sampling of his fiction: novels, collections of stories, and a couple of edited volumes. He felt touched. Honoured. His œuvre.

'Morning!' he called out.

'Henry!' the Director shrieked. Not her usual cheerful, modulated greeting.

'Here I am,' he said. 'No need to shout.'

'There's every need to shout,' she said. 'I'm surprised you dare show your face.'

'Why? What have I done?'

'What have you done? You've sabotaged us, Henry.'

'Me?'

'That stupid column,' she said. 'What did you mean by writing that? Are you trying to get us closed down?'

'Closed down?'

'What possessed you?'

'I thought it would be useful advice for young writers. How to keep out of trouble.'

'Keep out of trouble!' she gasped. 'Are you insane? It's caused nothing but trouble.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'Everything's wrong with it.'

'Who says so?'

'Kilkenny says so, for a start.'

'That old reactionary.'

Killer Kilkenny, as he was affectionately known to the right. Not exactly a darling of the right, despite his regular perambulations along Darling Street. He was too prickly to be anyone's darling. Bushy-bearded and dressed all in black serge like a partially defrocked priest, which he

claimed got him excellent service in Irish bars, he regularly excoriated progressives and leftists in rabid opinion pieces for the media, suitable for these days of terror. No one terrified more than Killer. To say terrorized would probably be actionable under the new subversion laws. Tricky, anyway. But a fearsome fellow he certainly was. With a regular column in the national press. The sort of thing Henry had hankered for, and the chance for which he had probably now lost for ever.

'That Cold War relic,' said Henry.

'I don't know anything about that,' said the Director. She did, and often said so. Her denial now was ominous.

'What about him, anyway?'

'He's got a whole piece in the paper attacking us.'

'Publicity,' said Henry.

'It is not the sort of publicity we want. He's asking why the federal and state governments support us.'

'Good question,' said Henry. 'I've often wondered.'

'It is not a good question,' she said. 'And after this they'll probably stop supporting us.'

'No worries,' said Henry. 'We'll privatize. In keeping with the spirit of the times. He should approve of that.'

'Privatize!' she shrieked. 'I'll have your bloody privates,' she promised, 'Just you wait.'

She picked up a vicious looking pair of scissors from her desk.

The Criminal shuddered.

'I'll have your guts for garters is the traditional phrase, I believe,' Henry suggested.

'Women don't wear garters any more, Henry. Or is it so long since you had a chance to notice?'

Pretty severe insult from a feminist, he reflected. He was not sure she was factually correct, either. Surely he had seen garters with hundred dollar bills stuck inside them, somewhere or other, reality TV or something. But best not mentioned right now. Or ever, probably.

'What's he complaining about, anyway?'

'He says we're promoting subversion and inciting terrorism and our funding should be withdrawn'

'Hardly,' said Henry. 'Though it was a pretty good piece. Obviously touched a nerve to make him react like that.'

'You've ruined us, Henry. Why did you do it?'

'I thought it was the sort of thing you wanted.'

'Wanted?'

'You read it, didn't you?'

'I can't read everything,' she said. 'I had a deadline. I trusted you.'

'That's touching,' he said.

'Never again,' she said. 'This, Henry, is the last time you do this.'

'Do what?'

'Bring us into disrepute. I've already had the stake-holders on the phone.'

'Stake-holders?' said Henry.

'The Ministry. The Literature Board.'

'Stake-holders,' Henry repeated reflectively. 'So what do you see me as? Dracula? Waiting for my heart to be impaled by arts bureaucrats?'

'You said it,' said the Director.

He tried baring his teeth and slavering. She didn't notice, too busy baring her own.

'What did they want?'

'They wanted to know if Kilkenny's piece was true.'

'I doubt it. It's usually a load of reactionary lies. As you've said yourself.'

'I've never said any such thing. And don't you say it either. Especially in public.'

'So what did he say about us?'

'He called us a Stalinesque Soviet-style Writers' Union. He said we were a last refuge for subversives and terrorist sympathisers.'

'A Stalinesque Soviet-style Writers' Union,' said Henry. 'That's a good one. If only.'

'It is not a good one,' said the Director. 'It is an absolute disaster.'

'So what do you want me to do about it?'

'Nothing!' she said. Firmly. 'Don't you do anything till I tell you. Don't speak to anyone. Don't speak to the press.'

'You don't want me to write a response?'

'No,' she said. 'Absolutely not. That's the last thing we want. We'll have to call a meeting.'

'A meeting?'

'A special meeting of the committee.'

'That's a terrible thing to do,' said Henry. 'Is it really so serious?'

'Yes.'

'But calling a meeting.' He could think of nothing worse. 'It's like being condemned without a fair trial.'

'What is?'

'Calling a meeting.'

'Henry,' said the Director.

'Yes, my dear.'

'Just get out.'

'Get out? Are you telling me to get out?'

She picked up one of Henry's books from her desk and hurled it at him.

'I say,' he said, 'that's one of my books.'

'Here's another one,' she said.

It flew through the air and disintegrated against the wall, pages fluttering down to the ground. So much for perfect binding.

'Hold on,' he said, backing towards the door. 'Don't do that. They're out of print.'

'Good,' she said. 'And I hope they're never reprinted.'

She picked up another one.

'They're library copies,' he said. 'You won't be able to replace them.'

'I've culled them,' she said. 'I don't want anyone from the Ministry coming round and finding them on the shelves. They're wasting useful space. Like you, Henry,' she added.

She took more careful aim with one of the anthologies he had edited. He got out rapidly. It was a substantial volume and made quite an impact as it hit the door.

It was like those times over the years that publishers and editors and producers had closed their doors on him, dropped him from their lists, hung up on him, generally because of some small thing he had written or said. Probably said. He doubted they ever read what he had written. Though never had they reacted with such physical force. And all he had wanted to do was to warn young writers of the dangers they should avoid, recommending circumspection, tact,

discretion, politeness even. Warn them of the sorts of things it was best not to utter. At least, not in their own voice. *In propria persona*, if he remembered correctly. A long time since he had cited any of the phrases of the Latin rhetoricians. Things, anyway, best buried deep in the fiction, ascribed to the mouths of dodgy characters. Or babes and sucklings. Make sure your novels had sufficient numbers of babes and sucklings to allow the truth to out. Though he wasn't at all sure they fitted into the sort of novel he wrote. As W. B. Yeats' son remarked of his father, 'He wasn't much of a family man.' Maybe he could have some politician kissing them. The babes and sucklings. Fiction in the age of terror.

Despite Henry's objections the Director called a meeting.

'Over my dead body,' said Henry.

'Perfect,' said the Director. 'Precisely what I want. The sooner the better. It would give us all great satisfaction. We'll scatter your ashes in the Writers' Garden of Remembrance. Without a headstone.'

'No epitaph?' Henry asked.

My forgotten man.

Half the committee phoned to apologize. Couldn't get there.

'One of the advantages of western so-called democracy,' said Pawley, who was in town and did turn up and arrived early for a decent shot at the wine.

The Director snarled and flexed her fingers with their newly painted nails. Blood red.

'I am disgusted with this committee,' she said.

'The electorate has failed, dissolve the electorate,' said Pawley. 'Send in a peace-keeping force.'

'You wouldn't want a committee that did anything,' Henry assured her. 'Not one that participated in the running of the centre. Gave you instructions you wouldn't want to fulfil.'

'The only thing I don't want at the moment,' she said, 'is any comment from you, Henry.'

She tabled the issue.

'The problem is the stakeholders,' she said. 'If they take notice of Killer's piece, they could cut our funding. We need to do something quickly.'

'Take them to lunch,' said Henry.

'Then they can see how reasonable Henry is,' said Pawley.

'There is no way I am letting Henry anywhere near them,' she said. 'He is totally unreasonable.'

'Make a public confession,' Sam Samson suggested. Years in jail honing his skills as a prison poet had taught him the wisdom of compliance. 'Repudiate what you wrote.'

'I don't know about that,' said Henry.

'You can repudiate something you still believe in,' said Sam. 'You just have to repudiate it for the public record. Say it was a reprint of something you wrote years ago. Which you no longer hold to. On mature reflection. They'll love that. They love words like mature. Manure. Bullshit. All that stuff.'

'I recant,' Pawley intoned. 'I repent.'

'That's it,' said Sam. 'Say you only did the column because you were having trouble getting published anywhere else.'

'I am not having trouble getting published,' said Henry.

'You will do now,' said Sam. 'Unless you recant.'

The Director read from Killer's diatribe.

'Stalinesque Soviet-style Writers' Union,' she said.

'Why Stalinesque?' Henry asked.

'You prefer Stalinist?' Pawley asked. 'Wouldn't we all.'

'No we would not,' said the Director.

'It's meant to imply the grotesque,' said Henry. 'We should sue.'

When in doubt, attack.

'Don't sue,' said Sam. 'Never go to court. They always screw you. Remember Oscar Wilde. It wasn't the buggery that got him in gaol, it was going to court. I speak from experience,' he added, authoritatively.

No one asked specifically which experience.

'It's great publicity,' said Henry. 'Maybe we should rename ourselves. The Josef Stalin Writers' Union, Soviet Style.'

'I think you've said enough on this issue, Henry,' said the Director.

'Never,' said Henry. 'I always have more.'

'What more?' asked Sam suspiciously. 'You're not trying to rename it again. We already discussed that.'

'We should sue for slander.'

'You can't slander an institution,' said the committee's token legal entity. 'You can only slander a person.'

'I feel slandered,' said Henry.

'I can't see why,' said Pawley. 'I thought you admired Soviet-style writers' unions. I thought everyone agreed with President Putin that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century.'

'Well, you thought wrong,' said the Director.

‘Wrongly,’ said Henry.

'I don't think so,' said Pawley. 'Not in Henry's case.'

'That's beside the point,' said Henry. 'If we can't sue, I vote we do nothing.'

'Hear, hear,' said Sam. 'Vote informal.'

The committee members murmured agreement. Turning up to consume a couple of gourmet sandwiches and a few glasses of wine was all very well, but that didn't mean they were prepared to do anything.

'I think I should write to the paper,' said the Director.

'Never,' said Sam. 'Never complain, never explain.'

'It would keep our name in the paper.'

'Your name,' said Henry.

'I would have thought the thing to aim for was keeping the name out of the papers,' said Pawley.

'It's publicity,' said the Director.

'So was Killer Kilkenny's piece,' said Henry. 'A whole op-ed piece. You can't buy publicity like that. Biggest spread we've ever had.'

'Maybe I could send them a poem,' said Sam.

'You do that,' Pawley encouraged.

'I still think a letter,' said the Director.

'A poem's better,' said Sam. 'It’s more –,’

Words seem to fail him.

‘Literary,’ suggested Pawley.

‘Yeah, literary, more –,’

He still hesitated.

‘Poetic?’ Pawley suggested.

‘Yeah, that’s the word,’ said Sam. ‘More poetic.’

'Couldn't agree more,' said Henry. 'Do I have a proposer? Sam, good. A seconder? Pawley. Good. Those in favour say Aye. Those against, no. The Ayes have it. Motion carried. Can you minute that, Madam Director?'

'No,' she said.

'I'm afraid you have to. The committee has decided . I know how keen you are for the committee to take an active role.'

'Do we have a quorum?' asked the token legal entity.

The Director leafed through the constitution.

'Thoughtful of you to bring it,' said Henry.

'I always bring it,' she said. She counted the committee members present.

They didn't have a quorum.

'No point going on, really,' said Henry. 'We can't vote on anything. Any other business? No. Good. I declare the meeting closed.'

'Brilliant,' said Pawley. 'You handled that brilliantly. Uncle Joe would have been proud of you. Enough of participatory democracy. If we're going to be a Soviet-style writers' union, let's run it like one.'

'Why not?' Henry asked.

The Director stormed off to her office.

'Clean up before you leave,' she instructed them.

'I assume she means finish off the bottles,' said Henry.

'There's still a couple unopened,' said Sam, taking out his multi-functional penknife, lock-pick and corkscrew.

They went out onto the veranda and sat in the fragrant evening air, flying foxes chattering in the Moreton Bay fig trees, owls hooting over the deserted buildings.

The Director's four-wheel drive sports-utility vehicle roared out of the car park in a swirl of gravel, like a United Nations' Special Envoy leaving a war zone.

Sam began penning his poem.

13: Creative Writing: The CV

One of Henry's continuing pleasures was working on his bibliography and curriculum vitae, his CV. The bibliography of his publications more than the details of his employment. He could sit for hours at the computer, scrolling through the record of his life and works, as they used to call those studies of literary gents when such things still got published. He could exclaim with Dean Swift, 'What a talent I had then!' The novels. The stories. The essays. The reviews. All separately listed.

His wife found it absurd. But then, Henry felt, she found most of his activities absurd. Let alone his inactivities.

'I thought the idea of early retirement was to give up work.'

'Absolutely.'

'And now you're applying for another job.'

The very thought of it made him sick in the pit of his stomach.

'No, I'm not.'

'So why are you fiddling around with your CV all day?'

'I enjoy it.'

'Enjoy it!' she said.

'I'm keeping it up to date.'

'What's the point?'

What was the point of anything, for that matter, in these twilight years?

'It's a record of what I've done.'

'Done?'

'Written.'

'Why do you need it, you've got the books?'

But having the books and the magazines and the journals and the anthologies wasn't the point. They were part of the point, of course. If he'd had the Master's study with its vast mahogany desk on which the blotting paper is changed every day, its walls lined with indexed bookshelves, one of which is reserved for calf-bound copies of the Master's own works, the glinting paper knife, the crystal ink bottle, the paperweight, the whole hallowed apparatus, that would have been something. But still, not entirely the point. And anyway, he didn't. Those days were over. As Auden put it, the soft carpets, the big desks will all be reserved by the

management for the whopping liars. Henry had a pine wood Ikea table in the corner of the bedroom, or a share of the dining-room table.

The point was the list. Though the only lists his wife seemed to believe in were the shopping lists she pressed on him, sending him out to hunt and gather. When he'd kept a list of the books he'd read, she had derided that, too.

'Can't you remember them?'

'Most of them.'

'So why bother?'

Why bother with anything, for that matter. Why let the autonomic nervous system continue? Euthanasia now.

It was something he'd begun to do in adolescence. Lists of bus numbers, lists of aircraft registrations, lists of books read.

'I suppose you keep a list of all your women, too.'

And was that so improper? Probably these days it was. It was not something you could ask. He kept it in his head, anyway. Not the sort of thing to entrust to computer or paper.

But the list of all his works. It was simply too large to keep in his head. True, the ancient bards entrusted to memory immensely long epic poems and heroic declamations. It was possible to train the memory. But if he were going to train the memory in such a major way, wouldn't it be preferable to memorize the works themselves, not just the list of them? Then he could astound the audiences at writers' festivals by reciting an entire novel without a text. Not that writers' festivals would welcome such a thing. Not that they any more seemed to welcome him. Publishers' festivals they were more properly called, these days.

So the memory remained untrained. It was a bit late in the day, anyway, to work on that. Like everything else. So he relied on keeping the bibliography up to date on computer, religiously so, so that nothing would be forgotten. In theory it was all in the Akashic records, but that was a matter of taking things on trust. He didn't necessarily disbelieve, but he hadn't stuck his fingers in the nail holes.

Sometimes it would be a session of delightful memories, recalling the circumstances in which this piece had been written, that piece published. Recollected images fluttered briefly in some region, not exactly before his eyes, in the imagination somewhere.

In the past there had been students studying for librarianship diplomas who had assembled the bibliography of some poet, some novelist, some literary treasure, which had been subsequently published by some library board. Henry hadn't noticed such items for a while. He had always kept in mind the possibility of suborning some such student, some possible acolyte, offering his assembled bibliography for her to submit and publish. But he suspected that now they were all into information technology rather than the fruits. The days for the publication of a bibliography in progress had passed. Like everything else.

Somewhere in his consciousness he felt that there was a degree of indulgence about this bibliographical activity, if activity it could be called. Reverie, perhaps. It gave Henry pleasure, and that always worried him: was there pleasure without indulgence? Surely there was. But for Henry, there was always the doubt, always the guilt, the fear that something pleasurable was merely indulgence, not work, not morally uplifting.

He tried analysing the source of the pleasure. Was it mere ego? Vanity? Delusion of significance? Or was it more psychologically worrying, evidence of some deep lack of integration and wholeness in his personality? Was it the case that he doubted his very existence

unless he could extrapolate and externalize some aspect of it and so reassure himself? Reassure himself he still existed, that he had done good work, and lots of it, lists of it, even if he no longer worked. Was there an anxiety after all those years of institutionalization that, no longer a part of the system, he was no longer of any worth or significance? Was it the case that, without the job that he was so glad to have left, he was now unnecessary? Was he, for all his denials, missing the job? Or missing the structure of justification for his existence? And so these searches through the pages of his bibliography were a search for that justification, a way of reassuring himself. Even more, a way to create a self, not merely reassure it.

Or was it just a way of wasting time? Was it just a matter of occupying himself so that he could forget the fact that he had nothing else to do? Now he had all his time to himself, domestic duties apart, and he was unable to find a use for it. Was it the case that the job had in fact enabled him to write, that stealing time from the job had been his incentive, and now that he no longer had to steal time, he could no longer produce? Had the job been the equivalent of Balzac's huge debts, the engine of his writing, the necessity and the compulsion to produce the fiction, to invent a world in retreat from, or in response to, the pressure of the contingent?

Maybe.

Yes, could be.

And if that put him in the driven and neurotic and obsessive company of Balzac, well that had its satisfactions. Indeed it did.

Scrolling through the publications list, Henry considered the various ways he could group the items. Currently it was framed into separate sections: scholarly, fiction, journalism. These were the priorities of the job. The job he no longer held. Thankfully. But when he had held the job, the

bibliography had been shaped for its demands. Scholarly articles were deemed more important than fiction. For a while he had thought it would change with the introduction of creative writing courses. But all too rapidly it became clear that creative writing was going to be part of the education agenda. The interest was not in the writing produced, but in the theory and pedagogy. Careerists in creative writing were not expected to list novels or poems or stories they had written. In an addendum, perhaps. But the career focus was on articles about teaching writing, the theory of writing, writing and the fucking body. Henry's fiction, listed there in all its rich variety, variants, translations and anthologies, remained as irrelevant and marginal as it had been throughout his academic career. Former career.

He spent many hours restructuring the bibliography. In the past he had separated the scholarly from the journalistic. Indeed some of the journalistic he had not even recorded. It had been so frowned upon in the past. Now there was a change! It had been the received wisdom when Henry began his career that academics did not participate in journalism. At the worst they might contribute an occasional book review to the press. As long as it was something specialized, something quasi-academic. But regular reviewing was frowned upon. And feature journalism or opinion pieces were absolutely taboo. Of course some academics did write for the press, even then. A few. But their careers suffered. Chairs were denied them because of their populism.

So Henry, seeing not only no future in it, but also positive harm, had kept his distance from the press. At various times he had done some book reviewing. But it could not be listed in his annual publication report. And so it was not listed in the list of his life's work.

He was not sure when the change occurred. It caught him by surprise, he admitted that. He had not been observant enough of the shifts in acceptability, in the redefinitions of the job. Maybe he had not been reading the papers.

But, whenever it had happened, now it was institutionalized. Now academics in cultural studies and gender studies and education had their regular columns in the press. Now the political scientists and economists held forth regularly in the opinion pages, those with the right views. Now everybody was scratching and scraping to get into the reviews pages. Now academics eagerly sought out newspaper columns and achieved advancement on the basis of them, as far as Henry could make out. There was nothing else they seemed to have to advance on. Maybe just putting in the hours. Time serving as it used to be called.

Henry had been thinking about newspaper work. The pretence of scholarship was no longer necessary. Let alone the practice. Why write earnestly and learnedly for a culture that had died and a system that had been destroyed? Especially when such work was unpaid. Retirement was unregretted, but financially it was a bit tight. He fiddled around with the bibliography and rejigged it.

If he beefed up the journalism and so diluted the academic, recontextualized it was probably the way to put it, he could make it look like the record of a professional writer's life. Essays, reviews, commentaries. A bit of scholarship wouldn't hurt. Mark of a good education. Make it look like think pieces as the media called them. Make his literary production more integrated. The humanist at the desk top.

Not that anyone was going to see the list except Henry. He wasn't applying for work. Though a bit of freelance journalism would be good. If it paid well. Some did. Reviewing didn't.

But something to do when the creative juices didn't flow. When the well ran dry. Or the sap froze. All these sticky liquid metaphors. Why not when the lines were down, when transmissions had ceased? Or were being jammed.

And listing it all resituated it all for himself. Now he could refashion his past. Present himself as someone who had always scribbled for the press, no narrow elitist, no ivory towered scholar, no corduroy and leather elbow patched professor but a man of letters. If he rejigged it with that in mind he would be able to see himself as that and approach the media in confidence. It wasn't a matter of sending them the list. But of the revised self-image the augmented list would give him. He did not need to submit the bibliography to the broadsheet editors. But having restructured it enabled him to reinvent himself. It gave him many happy hours, the idea of producing journalism hovering there, but not impetuously acted upon. For the time being there was enough pleasure in perfecting the lists of times past.

He set to work to find the unlisted, to supplement what he had with what he had, if not denied, at least what he had, in that superseded past, chosen not to draw attention to.
He would represent the œuvre as that of a man of letters rather than a scholar, a contributor to the higher journalism as it used to be called. It was not a futile activity: rather, it enabled him to see himself more commercially. He would focus on the press in future and freelance some pieces to supplement the cash flow. The only requirement he could discern was that whatever was written should be bland and uncontroversial. That did not seem to be a problem anymore. He could write bland. Increasingly he wondered if he would ever write anything else. These days.

So Henry rewrote himself. The appendix of reviews and occasional writing was incorporated into the main body of the bibliography. Half-forgotten pieces in ephemeral weeklies were chased up. Some he dimly remembered he seemed to have no copies of.

He dragged himself into the university library one morning and tracked down some of the reviews he had written in journals he remembered writing for, preserved on browned and brittle paper in substantial bound volumes.

Dr Bee found him there, sitting at a desk by the slit in the ferro-concrete that passed for a window, meticulously leafing through issue after issue of a long defunct journal of opinion, other bound volumes stacked on the desk. Each was as surprised as the other.

'Can't stay away, Henry, is that it?' Dr Bee remarked.

'Makes two of us,' said Henry. 'Like birds released from captivity, we return to roost in our cage.'

'I wasn't planning on roosting,' said Dr Bee. 'Unless some particularly attractive proposition should come by. But I don't see one.'

He looked round at the deserted stacks, the steel shelving, the fluorescent lighting, the brutal concrete walls.

'Not a human form in sight. Much better pickings in the shopping malls. Disaffected housewives, merry widows, all the fun of the fair. But here -.'

He gestured.

'Where have all the flowers gone?' Henry said, half sang.

Dr Bee grimaced in distaste. He leaned over and looked at the date of the magazine Henry was consulting. Thirty something years ago.

'Lost in time, are we?'

'The good years,' said Henry. He reached out and turned one of the books Dr Bee was clutching so that he could read the spine.

'Simenon. Up to the minute as ever, I see.'

There was no denying it. Both were focussed firmly on the past. And neither could say they were very happy about it. But without a present to occupy them, where else could they focus? The future? Unimaginable, or all too imaginable.

'Next thing you'll be regretting no one lectures in gowns anymore,' Dr Bee said.

'No,' said Henry.

'No regrets, or no you never did?'

'Both,' said Henry. 'Lecturing in a gown seemed, I don't know -'

'Elitist?'

'Maybe.'

'Medieval?'

'Sort of.'

'Too much of a freak show?'

'That too. Backward looking, I felt.'

'You were a moderniser.'

'Well, up to a point.'

'But now you are full of retrospective regret.'

'Not really. I just wish I'd done more journalism.'

'And made more money.'

'Yes. Except that thirty years ago we were quite well off. Comparatively. So there wasn't the financial pressure. So it wasn't such an issue.'

'But it is now?'

'Yes.'

'Now you want to supplement your pension.'

'Wouldn't mind,' said Henry.

'By writing for this sort of thing.'

He gestured at the bound volumes.

'Trouble is this sort of thing no longer exists. The serious weeklies have died.'

'What about the unserious ones?'

'They died too.'

'So now it's the tabloids.'

Henry bridled a bit.

'I don't know about that.'

'Elitism still survives?'

'It's not a matter of elitism. It's just that I'm not sure I could do it very well.'

'Is it meant to be done well?'

'That's a point,' said Henry.

Neither Dr Bee nor Pawley had much interest in Henry's CV. Who wants to be asked to stand in awe at an old colleague's achievement? It was not something that could be expected of either of them. As a long shot, he tried mentioning it to the Director.

'What are you doing with yourself, Henry?' the Director had asked.

'Working on my bibliography.'

'Send me a copy when you're finished with it.'

'Really?' he said. Somebody cared? He didn't mention that he expected never to be finished, it was an ongoing project, his life. But he could send her the most recent version.

'We'll keep it on file,' she said.

'But you didn't,' said Pawley, when Henry mentioned it over lunch.

'Of course I did.'

'Oh, Henry,' said Pawley. 'I know I appeared insufficiently fascinated in your literary production.'

'No, no,' said Henry politely.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Pawley.

They sat in the Indian Summer garden restaurant, Pawley with his vegetarian thali special, Henry with his sag paneer, Dr Bee with his beef vindaloo. A bottle of Frascati in plastic netting that Dr Bee said reminded him of fishnet stockings stood on the table.

'Because I am,' Pawley continued. 'Insufficiently fascinated by your publications list. I did not invite you to email it to me and you are hurt.'

'No, I'm not hurt.'

'Yes you are. I can feel it. I can sense these things. Empathy.'

'You're stoned.'

'Heightens the senses,' said Pawley. 'The reason I did not encourage you to email me your list, despite your all too transparent desire to, was to protect you. If you were to email it to me, it would immediately find its way into some secret agency data bank, since without doubt all my emails are intercepted, just as the mail used to be, and still is. I'm sure they would find it very convenient having the complete list of your publications. Saves them having to hire some poor hack to compile it.'

'I don't know -,' Henry began.

'You have it on a secure computer, do you?' Pawley asked.

'Well -.'

'Not one you go on-line from.'

'I've only got the one PC.'

'I told you before, it's risky,' said Pawley. 'They could hack into it, do anything. Anyway, not to worry,' he added. 'Now it's on the Writers' Centre files for all to see. Every little detail. Serbian anthologies. Iranian translations. All the details of the Californian alternative. When will you ever learn, Henry?'

'Does the Director have every writer's CV on file?' Dr Bee asked.

'No idea.'

'Perhaps you should find out.'

'I imagine she might for the writers who've run workshops. Or given seminars there.'

'All filed and stored along with fingerprints and biometric data?'

'Seems like the obvious place,' said Henry.

'Indeed it does,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't see any problem,' said Henry. But falteringly. He reached for a napkin to wipe away the pureed spinach that had dribbled down his chin.

'You were always so trusting,' said Pawley. 'And now your trustworthiness is rewarded. Guardian of the National Treasury data bank. With someone of your impeccable credentials, who could fail to trust you? A fine figurehead. Luring in all the unsuspecting to deposit their intimate bibliographical details in the archives over which you preside.'

'I don't think it's like that at all.'

'Well you wouldn't, would you?' said Dr Bee, piling on the hot mango chutney.

‘Remember all that crap about the Soviets putting dissident writers in asylums,’ said Pawley.

‘Wasn’t it true?’ Henry asked.

‘Who knows?’

‘Quite a lot of people claim to,’ Dr Bee assured them.

‘Well, anyway, that’s not the point. The point is,’ Pawley pointed out, ‘that here we have a centre for dissident writers in the grounds of an asylum.’

‘What dissident writers?’ Dr Bee asked.

‘Well, how about Henry?’

‘How about you, Henry?’ Dr Bee asked.

Pawley pressed on before Henry could reply.

‘And now all his dissident data is on file in a so-called writers’ centre in a lunatic asylum.’

‘It is not a so-called writers’ centre, it’s a real writers’ centre,’ Henry objected, chair of it after all.

‘For so-called real writers,’ Dr Bee.

‘I’m just pointing out analogies, homologies, whatever,’ said Pawley.

‘Whatever, indeed,’ Dr Bee agreed.

'Why do you think the Centre was set up?' Pawley demanded.

'Cultural policy,' said Henry. 'Every advanced democracy supports the arts.'

Pawley laughed.

'You don't really believe that, Henry,' said Dr Bee.

'Well, it's true. What is there not to believe?'

'The motive, Henry. And don't say all that guff about cultural heritage and fostering national treasures.'

'They may get the priorities wrong,' Henry conceded.

'Indeed they do,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Fund the wrong people. Support idiotic projects. But the intention -.'

'The intention is to control,' said Pawley, stabbing into his dhal.

'The intention is to buy votes,' said Dr Bee, digging into the lime pickle.

'Votes?' said Henry. 'How many writers are there? You could count the number of votes from real writers on a couple of hands and a foot.'

'Real writers!' said Pawley. 'Who cares about real writers, whatever cultural illusion they might be? Funding shuts them up a bit, buys them off, stops them moaning in the press all the time. Like you said, their numbers are insignificant. The real votes are in the people who think they are writers. Those who would like to be writers. The literary ladies of a certain age. The ones who go to writers' festivals or writers' workshops instead of playing bridge or after playing bridge. Nothing wrong with it. Hobbyists. Like it says on the "Statement by a Supplier" tax form: "Reason for not quoting an Australian Business Number (ABN) to an enterprise, the supply is made in the course of an activity that is a private recreational pursuit or hobby." Old folks with hobbies. An integral part of our demographics.

'And then there are the inner-city upward-mobile bourgeoisie in marginal seats who feel culture enhances their life style and puts up real estate values. And don't forget the Unesco statistics, of course. Looks good in the international league tables to spend all this money on education and culture. Diverts attention from the policy on asylum seekers and the degradation of indigenous peoples.

'That's why they set up Writers' Centres. No real writers belong. One or two desperates. Those losing patronage. Losing publishers. No offence, Henry, nothing personal. The rest are wannabes. But if they feel the government is supporting them, they support it.'

'I have no problem with that,' said Henry. 'As long as some of the cash filters down to real writers.'

'Like yourself.'

'Not necessarily.'

'Like Francesca Templar and Tuscan Bayes.'

'Yes, well, they get it wrong sometimes, I said that.'

'No, they don't,' said Pawley. 'They get it right. Those are the old slags Foreign Affairs and the secret services like to support. The rest of the funds are pissed away on mentorships and equity and writers' festivals and writers' centres. And administration. Never forget administration. That takes most of it. Makes sure the money doesn't get into the hands of subversive artists.'

'I see you've thought about this.'

'Indeed we have,' said Dr Bee. 'We see our old colleague Henry putting himself forward for honours. Should get a gong for this community service even if he'll never get it for his novels. And we worry, Henry.'

'We are concerned for you,' said Pawley, breaking off a fragment of pappadam. 'Particularly when you front for a national data base collection agency monitoring dissidents, deviants, subversives, potential terrorists and other threats to civil order. I'd trash your CV now. While you can. And the copy on the Centre' computer. Get in there and delete it. Who wants to know the details of everything you've ever published, Henry?'

Henry looked at them, silent.

'No one with any good motives, you can be sure of that. The honours committee? If they look at it at all it will only be to find evidence for grounds to exclude you. And there'll be plenty of them. All those revolutionary sentiments you spouted in obscure, forgotten, unremembered publications. Which you so thoughtfully list. You want my advice, Henry. Wipe it.'

'Expunge it,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Trash it. And while you're at it, burn the books and magazines you still keep copies of. So no evidence remains. After all, even though they've got the bibliography, they can't really prove anything without the actual copies of what you wrote. So I'd send those old radical utterances up into flames straight away. And all those translation in pre-entrepreneurial China. Let alone the non-aligned nation stuff. India. The Former Yugoslavia. Libya. North Korea.'

'I never published in Libya or North Korea,' said Henry.

'Not that you know,' said Dr Bee. 'But you wouldn't want them speculating that you might have. Best reduce it all to a little heap of ash you can put in the Garden of Remembrance.'

'What Garden of Remembrance?'

'Ah,' said Dr Bee, 'you have already forgotten. The Garden of Forgetfulness, then.'

'You people,' said Henry, 'have you no faith in anything?'

'No,' said Dr Bee.

'No trust?'

'Absolutely not,' said Pawley.

'You're worm-eaten by cynicism.'

'It has been remarked,' said Dr Bee.

'Corroded by conspiracy theory.'

'Conspiracies are us,' said Pawley.

'You undermine everything.'

'I think you will find the undermining was already done,' said Dr Bee. 'We merely draw attention to it to save you from falling through the floor boards and breaking a leg.'

'Or neck,' said Pawley.

'Indeed. Or neck,' said Dr Bee.

'Is there nothing you believe in?'

'Cynicism,' said Dr Bee.

'Conspiracy,' said Pawley.

'Words fail me,' said Henry, breaking off a piece of naan.

'Thank heavens,' said Dr Bee.

'At last,' said Pawley.

The rest was silence. Except for the gentle tinkle of wine being poured. And Dr Bee tossing fragments of bone onto his plate after he had sucked out the last of their marrow.

14: Master Class

Sara phoned.

'Where's Sam?'

'No idea,' said Henry.

'He said he was seeing you.'

'Haven't seen him for months,' said Henry.

'What do you mean, months?' she snapped.

'A unit of measurement of from twenty-eight to thirty-one days.'

'I know what months are.'

'Twelve to a calendar year in my time, though that may have changed,' Henry added. 'I believe that in Napoleonic times there were ten months to the year. More rational. Easier for usurers to calculate percentages.'

'He said he'd been seeing you.'

'No.'

'Lying hound,' said Sara.

'Not I,' said Henry, on the principle that extreme grammatical correctness helped fend off the attacks of people like Sara.

'About a press.'

'A press?'

The renaissance form of torture? A cider-press? Not a bad drink. What he used to do to his trousers as a schoolboy, put them beneath the mattress to maintain their creases? Never worked. Created tram lines. Oh the shame and indignity of it.

'He said you were publishing his new book.'

'Why would I do that?'

'He hasn't been seeing you?'

'Not at all.'

'Lying little rat,' she said.

'That's Sam,' Henry agreed.

'He's run off,' she said. 'He's left me. He's taken all his books.'

'Taken his books?' said Henry. 'Sounds serious.'

'I'm bereft,' she said.

'You would be.'

'Abandoned. Deserted. Humiliated.'

'He'll probably come back.'

'No he won't. I refuse to have him back. I never want to see him again.'

'Fair enough.'

'He went off with that cow.'

'Which one was that?'

'What do you mean, which one? Were there others? You knew about them and didn't tell me?'

'I don't know anything,' said Henry.

'You're useless,' she said.

'Which cow?' he persisted.

'Sara,' she said.

All Sam's wives and girlfriends were called Sara. Like butlers in the great English country houses, they always had the same generic name. Saved having to worry about individual difference.

'Which Sara?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Yes what?'

'That witch.'

'Ah,' said Henry, 'that Sara.'

Sam phoned.

'Henry!'

'Yes,' said Henry, cautiously.

'You got Sara there?'

'Which Sara?'

'No, I've got witch Sara here. You want to say hello to her?'

'No thanks,' said Henry. 'Which Sara are you asking about?'

'My wife,' said Sam. He gave a yowl of pain. 'Lay off, Sara, pack it in.'

She packed it in, hard. Henry could hear the thump.

'My ex-wife,' he said.

'That's better,' said witch Sara, loudly, far from in the background.

'Why would I have your wife here?'

'She said she was going to visit you.'

'Why?'

'To find out where I was.'

'So where are you?'

'I'm in Balmain,' said Sam.

'You want me to tell her that?'

'You said she wasn't there.'

'She isn't. But if she comes round. Or phones.'

'No, mate. I thought you might come and see me. Meet in the pub. Talk about the press.'

'What press?'

'The one we're starting. You got a manuscript you want to publish?'

'I'll have a look. Whereabouts in Balmain?'

'In the pub. Why don't you come over now?'

'There are hundreds of pubs in Balmain,' said Henry.

'The Riverview,' said Sam.

'I'll see you there in an hour,' said Henry.

'Good one,' said Sam. 'I'd get out of the house before Sara finds you.'

'What I had in mind,' Henry agreed.

'Yeah, but this time it's serious. She thinks you've been harbouring me.'

'Harbouring you?'

'She'll kill you if she finds you.'

'But I haven't been harbouring you.'

'That's why she'll kill you,' said Sam.

'I'll be right over.'

But Sam had already hung up. Or Sara had put the phone down for him.

Henry selected a manuscript and went right over.

There was no sign of Sam in the Riverview. No sign of anyone, except for Killer Kilkenny at his usual table, sipping his Guinness and writing his column, putting the world to the right.

'Morning, Comrade,' Henry saluted him, taking his Cascade Light to a separate table.

Sam showed up after an hour or so.

'I got the wrong pub,' he said. 'I thought it was the Forth and Clyde.'

'The Forth and Clyde's been closed for a quarter of a century,' said Henry.

'I mean the Dry Dock.'

'So has the Dry Dock.'

'Terrible the way they've closed all the pubs,' said Sam. 'Every one I went to was closed.'

'But you had a drink in them all the same.'

'The ones that weren't closed,' said Sam. 'In case you were there.'

'I was here,' Henry said.

'All the time?'

'All the time.'

'Well, I'm here now, too,' Sam pointed out.

It was incontrovertible.

'So you moved out?'

'Yeah, Sara went to Melbourne. So Sara hired a van and moved all my books.'

'All of them?'

'It was a big van,' said Sam. 'A pantechnicon.' The language of poetry.

'Where did she move them to?'

'That was the problem. They wouldn't fit into her place. So they're in storage.'

Sam's library of poetry was immense. Add to that the unsold copies of books he had published through a succession of small presses, all folded, printers' bills unpaid, and the total was gigantic.

'So where are you living now?'

'Here.'

'The Riverview?'

'Balmain. Sara's. I had to get away.'

Henry sidestepped the merely personal.

'And what's this press?'

'Yeah,' said Sam. 'We're starting publishing again. Like the old days. Me and Sara. We're going to call it Samsara Press. How about that? Sam and Sara, get it?'

'Sounds good to me.'

'It is.'

'What are you going to publish?'

'Everything,' said Sam. 'You got a book?'

Henry indicated the manuscript in its envelope.

'Ripper,' said Sam.

The history of literature was full of works of genius that had languished until some farsighted visionary had rescued them and eased them into print. Christopher Isherwood's *The Memorial*, Henry Green's *Party Going*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

'Where's the money coming from?'

'What money?'

'To publish.'

'Oh, that money,' said Sam. 'Sara's got all these rich friends. Dentists. Lawyers. Spies. Patrons of the arts. They want to invest. I've been seeing her.'

'So I heard.'

'Did you?'

'I gather you said you'd been seeing me.'

'Did I?' said Sam. 'I had to say something. Until it was all worked out. Then she phoned and said the money had come through and she'd hired a van.'

'And has it?'

'Has what?'

'The money come through.'

'Yeah,' said Sam. 'You had to pay in advance for the van. Otherwise they wouldn't let you have it.'

'And the money for the press?'

'Yeah,' said Sam. 'No problem.'

'You've got it?'

'It's on its way,' said Sam. 'Samsara. What do you reckon?'

'Sure it hasn't been used already?'

'Dunno,' said Sam. 'We'll just change it. Add a couple of letters. Salaamsara. How about that? Salute to Sara.'

'How about Samsahara?' said Henry.

The lone and level sands stretched far away.

'Salaamsahara,' Sam offered. 'How about that?'

'Why not?' Henry agreed.

Yonder all before me lie deserts of vast eternity.

'You want a drink?' Henry asked.

'Yeah. But I haven't got any money.'

'I thought you said Sara had all these rich friends.'

'She does. But they're rich people. They don't just hand it over. They only want to invest and make more money. I don't have any pocket money.'

He turned his pockets inside out, left them flapping there like beagles' ears.

'See.'

Henry saw.

'So how are you going to live?'

'Live?' said Sam. 'I don't know. Like I always have, I guess. I could always go back to jail.'

'Do you want to do a workshop?'

'A prison workshop?'

'No, at the Writers' Centre. Teach a poetry workshop.'

'That would be neat,' said Sam. 'Maybe a master class. Sounds less like prison.'

'I'll talk to the Director. Get it on the program,' Henry promised. His role as Chair. Help for the indigent.

'Ripper,' said Sam. He looked at his empty pockets. 'You got the price of a drink?'

Henry offered him a five-dollar note. Sam went to the bar and came back with something disgusting. Cold Comfort. Southern Duck.

Henry passed the manuscript over. 'See if you like it.'

'The drink?'

'The book.'

'Bound to,' said Sam.

Henry nodded in agreement.

'I don't know,' said the Director. Huge sprays of wattle wilted over her desk and showered it with yellow pollen.

'Of course you do,' said Henry.

'What do you mean?'

'You always know.'

She looked at him keenly.

'What's best,' Henry explained.

'But he's so unreliable.'

'He's a poet.'

'Why are all your friends so unreliable?'

'I don't know,' said Henry. 'They're not all poets, though. That's for sure.'

'Those dithering old men you have lunch with.'

'Well, take me to lunch more often,' Henry suggested. 'Then I won't have to see as much of them.'

'Oh, Henry,' she said.

'We can discuss policy over lunch. Free from phone calls. Plan workshops.'

'And you can try and persuade me to give Sam Samson a workshop.'

'A master class he prefers.'

'What's a master class?'

'Like a workshop only more so.'

'A whole weekend?'

'He needs the money.'

'Why?'

'Because he's left Sara.'

'I'm not in the business of supporting men who abandon their wives.'

'She's not abandoned,' said Henry. 'She's the one with the money. He's got nothing.'

'He should have thought of that before he left her.'

'He's a good poet.'

'I thought you said there were no good poets.'

'Not good in the sense of human beings, necessarily,' Henry explained. 'But insofar as poets go, he's a good one.'

'Human being?'

'No. Poet. He's the best there is.'

'You'll be wanting me to put his photo on the cover of the magazine next.'

Poetic hat and chiffon scarf.

'That's a great idea,' Henry agreed. 'That would get them in.'

'Get them in?'

'To the master class.'

'I hope you're right about this, Henry.'

'Trust me,' said Henry.

'I don't,' she said.

'Well, just do it anyway.'

She took out the program schedule. There it was. A free weekend. Henry edged his finger across to the empty space.

It got them in. Two dozen eager fledgling poets and poetesses and poetasters and poetasteresses, their quills quivering in the fresh morning air, breathing in the poetic zephyrs of the Centre's grounds, clutching their cappuccinos and café lattes and mineral waters and unnatural juices as they waited for Sam to arrive and initiate them into the Orphic mysteries.

They waited in vain.

The oracles had fled.

Bare ruined choirs.

Broken spondees.

Paranomasia lost.

The muse in chains.

'So what happened?' Henry asked.

'What happened is I learned never to trust you or your creepy cronies or your half-baked ideas ever again,' the Director told him.

'I say,' said Henry.

'You've said quite enough. More than enough.'

'That's a bit harsh, isn't it?'

'No,' she said.

'Didn't he turn up?'

'Of course he didn't turn up. Your friend, Henry. You arranged it all. Put him on the magazine cover. How does that make us look?'

'Ah, well,' said Henry. 'Poets.'

'Poets?' she shrieked.

He hoped it would impact. Poets. Keep them at bay. He stopped himself from saying par for the course or poetic license or any other soothing saw. But he did not think it would be hard to engineer the Director's agreement. Not a total ban on them. But limit them. Contain them.

Whatever they did in future, just don't encourage them. Never make an encouraging move with poets.

'What happened to him?' he asked.

'He's gone back to his wife.'

'Sara? But he only just left her.'

'She took him back.'

'Took him back?'

'Snatched him off the street,' said the Director. 'She hired a Hummer and cruised round Balmain with a couple of heavies. They grabbed him when he was coming out of the Riverview. Extraordinary rendition.'

'How do you know that?'

'Sara told me.'

'His wife?'

'The other one.'

'Nice to be in demand,' said Henry.

'He isn't now,' said the Director.

'Fair enough.'

'It certainly is not. We've had to refund everyone's money.'

'What about Sam?'

'What about him?'

'His money. Didn't you pay him in advance?'

'We certainly did not.'

'He asked for that.'

'So you said.'

'But you didn't.'

'We certainly did not.'

'Well, that's something.'

'No thanks to you.'

'I still don't see why he couldn't do the workshop, just because he'd gone back to his wife.'

'She wouldn't let him out.'

'She locked him in?'

'Dosed him up with pills and locked him in his study.'

'Can't he get out the window?'

'She's bought a dog.'

'Why wouldn't she let him out?'

'She was afraid Sara would enrol in the workshop and grab him back.'

'Did she?'

'Did she what?'

'Enrol in the workshop?'

'Yes.'

'Did you give her her money back?'

'No. Nor the two creatures in football socks who enrolled with her. They never looked like they were poets to me.'

'You can never tell with poets.'

'I could with these.'

'And they didn't object?'

'About what?'

'About not getting a refund.'

The Director shrugged. 'I told them to apply to Sam.'

'Did they?'

'I've no idea.'

'Haven't you spoken to him?'

'Never again,' said the Director. 'He's blacklisted. For life. For eternity.'

‘But he’s on the committee.’

‘Not anymore,’ she said. ‘I’ve purged the committee.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘Yes I can. He never paid his membership dues.’

‘Maybe he thought being on the committee he didn’t have to.’

‘His cheque bounced.’

'And he hasn't called?'

'I've programmed the computer to put all his emails directly into the deleted file and the phones to refuse calls from his number.'

'A bit severe, isn't it?'

'Nothing to what I've got in mind for you,' she said. 'You're lucky you're not blacklisted too. No more of your irresponsible friends for a start.'

'Ah well,' said Henry. 'Sorry about that.'

A thought struck him.

'What happened to the press?'

'What press?'

'The one he and Sara were starting.'

'It's finished.'

'What do you mean, it's finished.'

'Sara closed it down.'

'So what happened to the manuscripts?'

'She came out here with a box of them and asked if she could use the shredder.'

Henry shuddered. 'You didn't let her.'

'No, the Criminal said it wasn't secure. He said Pawley had told him how the Stasi had shredded all their files but the Americans developed a new computer program to reassemble them.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'What, about the Stasi files?'

'No, the manuscripts.'

'Oh, there's no need to worry about them,' the Director assured him. 'She burned them.'

'She didn't.'

'She did. I gave her a Writers' Centre matchbook and we went out into the Garden of Forgetfulness and we burned them together. Scattered the ashes. Hosed them down so they dissolved.'

'You what?'

'Your idea, Henry. You said we should hand out complimentary matchbooks with the Centre's logo on them. Promotion, I recall your saying. You liked them being called books, more appropriate than disposable lighters for a Writers' Centre you said. Better books than free ballpoint pens. Encourage reading rather than writing.'

'But that was one of my manuscripts,' said Henry.

'Isn't that fortunate, then,' said the Director. 'There's some justice in the world after all.'

'What am I going to do?' Henry wailed.

'Well, you'll just have to write another one, won't you,' said the Director. 'You've got nothing else to do. Not here.'

15: Car Dreams

Pawley took a mouthful of vegetarian Red Curry.

'The East is Red,' he announced with satisfaction.

'Not any more, it isn't,' Dr Bee reminded him.

'It will be,' said Pawley, positive as ever in accord with his vision of Socialism and the New Age philosophies of the Northern Rivers.

They sat unwaited on in the Time and Thai'd restaurant.

'I should have been an arts bureaucrat,' said Henry, sadly reflecting on the lost chances of alternate lives.

'Early retirement not good enough?' Dr Bee queried.

'Arts bureaucracy and early retirement. The burning issues of our time,' said Pawley.

'You should write a novel about them, Henry,' Dr Bee suggested.

'Hot stuff,' Pawley agreed. 'A literary red curry.'

'I don't want to write about arts bureaucrats,' said Henry.

'You want to be one,' said Pawley.

'Absolutely.'

'Your lust for power still undiluted,' said Dr Bee. 'Absolute power, indeed.'

'Not at all. Not especially, anyway,' said Henry. He toyed with his Pad Thai, chasing the rice noodles round his bowl. 'I was thinking of the travel. I could have swanned around South East Asia. Singapore. Shanghai. Sri Lanka. Shangrai-la.'

'You did.'

'Well, yes. But more.'

'But more?'

'More,' said Henry, looking at his empty glass like Oliver Twist. Literary to the end.

'I would have thought that's exactly what you are,' said Pawley.

'An orphan child?'

'An arts bureaucrat. Chair of the Writers' Union.'

'Writers' Centre,' said Henry. 'And I don't get paid.'

'No mileage in getting paid,' said Dr Bee. 'Get paid and you get taxed. Not the way to go. It's the perks that matter.'

'Perks! What perks?'

'Every month you get your chatty little essays published in the newsletter,' said Dr Bee.

'Magazine,' said Henry.

'Whatever.'

'I give them those for free,' said Henry. 'No money in it.'

'Exactly. Any self-respecting organization would charge you to put them into print. In fact,' said Pawley, warming to his theme, 'that's how the place could make some money, publish the members each month and charge them.'

'Like classified advertisements,' said Dr Bee. 'Advertisements for Themselves.'

'Think positively,' said Pawley. 'You're doing all right out of it as it is. Glass of wine on the veranda at sundown. Lunch with visiting arts bureaucrats and the occasional writer. A chance to gladhand the Minister or the Premier.'

'Think positively?' said Henry.

'What would you like that you are not getting?' Dr Bee asked. 'Besides young flesh.'

Taped melodies evoking oriental bargirls played plangently in the background. Lotus flowers, *The World of Suzie Wong, Love is a Many Splendored Thing*. 'What do you think you should claim as a necessity for your role as Chair?'

There was a long silence as Henry brooded on all the missing possibilities, all the unlived lives flashing before his eyes.

'A car, maybe,' he said. 'All the administrators get them at university. And the Deans. It must be possible to claim one.'

'Of course,' said Dr Bee. 'I remember your wife telling me somewhat acidly of your secret life.'

'My secret life?'

'Some men, she told me, keep a secret store of old *Playboys*. But what does Henry have in that cardboard wine box beneath his desk? Back issues of *Classic Car*. Not even *Hot Rod* or *Performance Car*.'

Henry blushed. 'Research,' he said.

'I'm sure,' said Dr Bee. 'I bet that's what you say to all the lithe young mechanics.'

'So what sort of car would be appropriate for your role as chairman?' Pawley asked. 'A Charade, maybe?'

‘Or a Mirage,’ Dr Bee suggested.

'How about a 2CV?' Dr Bee asked. 'For you, your bibliography, and back-up.’

‘Me, myself and I,' Dr Bee intoned. Years of insomniac nights listening to Billie Holiday. 'Or something Papal, maybe. A Fiat. No? Something more literary? And classic. Like Lord Peter Wimsey's Daimler. One of the originals with the pattern of corrugation at the top of the grille. It always annoys me the way the cover artists get it wrong. They draw a car and never get the characteristic grille.'

'Is that all that annoys you?’ Pawley asked. ‘Just that one thing?’

'One of the many,' Dr Bee conceded, spearing something meaty, beef rendang, maybe, with what Pawley felt was unnecessarily exaggerated relish.

'I don't really identify with Wimsey,' said Henry

'How about a Bentley, then? Famous nineteenth-century publisher. Infamous nineteenth-century classicist. The man who rewrote *Paradise Lost*. Or the twentieth-century inventor of the clerihew.'

'A bit pricey,' Pawley said. 'Maybe an Austin.'

'Jane Austen's not spelled that way,' said Henry.

'Oh, not her. No, a forgotten brand for a forgotten poet laureate. Alfred Austin. Or a Morris. Like our great communist visionary of the same name. William Morris, in case you forget in these counter-revolutionary times.'

'A Bull-Nose possibly,' Dr Bee reflected, gazing into the beef rendang. 'But on balance I still think a Bentley. James Bond drove a 1933 Bentley four and a half litre with Amherst-Villiers supercharger in the first Bond novel.'

'I don't want an antique,' Henry complained. 'Why not something contemporary?'

'Something for our times?' Pawley asked. 'How about a Humvee? Perfect for a writer in the age of terrorism. The Americans send their Iraqi collaborators out in Toyotas. Blown to shreds in every ambush. You need heavy-duty armour these days. Definitely a Humvee. For when things get really bad. Like now.'

'Withstand any attack by poets,' said Dr Bee.

'And rocket attacks from the security services or tactical response groups. Now they've got the sedition laws in place they're bound to use them. They'll target writers. You need to be prepared.'

'Absolutely,' agreed Dr Bee. 'It's not just Islamic fundamentalists or revivalist Christians who'll be gunning for you for your salacious fictions. The tax office could target you for tax fraud. All those overseas trips you claimed as necessary research. Very dodgy.'

'How about a Dodge?' Pawley offered.

'No, it has to be a Humvee,' Dr Bee insisted. 'They'll try and repossess any car he drives. Hard to repossess a Humvee if it's properly armoured and secured.'

'Alternatively you could get an armoured personnel carrier,' Pawley suggested. 'Disguised as an ambulance, of course. Put a red cross on it. That might be the safest.'

'Put in an order with your Criminal friend at the Writers' Clinic,' Dr Bee suggested. 'He'll know how to get you what you want.'

'And move quickly,' Pawley suggested. 'It's a nice little sinecure you've got yourself. But how long are you going to last? How long before they catch up with you?'

'Before who catches up with me?'

'Your enemies. And don't say you don't have any.'

'Which ones?'

'Well, the secret state, for a start. When they find an old subversive like you is flying high on public funds, they'll make their move.'

'They're only interested in Arabs and Muslims now.'

'Don't you believe it. Anyway, how long before you end up encouraging terrorism? Spouting your theories that 9/11 was an inside job. That they knew it was going to happen and they let it go ahead to give them an excuse to bomb Afghanistan and Iraq.'

They sipped their wine reflectively. A light, inexpensive Soave that went as well with Asian food as any wine did. A few aircraft roared overhead, but none of them flew into any public buildings.

'That's not my theory,' said Henry.

'I'll give you the evidence,' said Pawley.

'I don't want to hear it.'

'Good try, Henry. Wise move. But you will. I'll make sure you will. And then, wham, bam.'

'What do you mean, wham, bam?'

'Then your vehicle of choice will be a hearse,' said Dr Bee.

16: Staying Alive

Henry sat despondent in The Golden Bowl. The restaurant was empty because he was early, and he was early because he had nothing much else to do. By noon Henry was hungry, hungry for food, hungry for company. Thirsty too. Most of the customers came in for lunch at one or one-

thirty, civilized Italian style. But Henry was there when the doors opened at noon, and sometimes before. He sat there browsing through the paper until Dr Bee or Pawley arrived. A bottle of wine stood on the table already opened, breathing, Henry already stuck into a glass, and still breathing too.

Dr Bee came in not much later. They grunted at each other, greetings of a sort, of a sort given when breath was short and civilities eroded with familiarity.

'Keeping busy?' Henry asked. 'Prowling the shopping-malls?'

Dr Bee claimed the shopping malls were the site of contemporary erotic adventure. The *flaneur* of Franklins. The *boulevardier* of Bi-Lo. The merry old soul of Coles.

'Too sick,' said Dr Bee. 'I lay in bed and planned my own funeral.'

‘Listening to *The Dream of Gerontius*?’

‘I was too ill to play music.’

‘Not even the Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary? Or the Dead March from *Saul*?’

‘Nothing.’

'And you lay there alone?'

'Just planning a funeral,' said Dr Bee. 'Not a suicide pact.'

'Ah, well,' said Henry. 'I suppose it's something to pass the time. Such as is left.'

'Churchill spent the last decade of his life planning his funeral.'

'There you are then,' said Henry. 'It gives you an interest in life.'

'Not really,' said Dr Bee.

'In death, then. Though planning your funeral sounds pretty terrible to me.'

'It may sound terrible but you're still going to need one,' said Dr Bee.

'Face that when I come to it,' said Henry

'Somehow I doubt you will be able to.'

'We shall see,' said Henry.

'Most likely you won't,' said Dr Bee.

They picked desultorily at the marinated olives. Dr Bee poured some olive oil onto a plate and dipped his bread in it.

'Olive oil reduces cholesterol,' he announced.

'Ah,' said Henry. 'So you're not leaping into this funeral. You're still attempting to stave it off.'

'It has to be cold-pressed olive oil,' said Pawley joining them. 'And extra virgin.'

Dr Bee gave a lascivious laugh, lapping his lips round the phrase. 'Extra virgin.' Early retirement had not reduced his lasciviousness, as he kept reminding them.

Henry had leapt at it. Early retirement. The alternative had been an increased teaching load. Worse than that, his old personalized courses had been scheduled for termination. The few that were left. The future was group teaching. Or first year tutorials. It appealed to none of them. 'If it had been group sex?' Dr Bee pondered. But it hadn't.

They had all taken it. Early retirement. Various incentives had been dangled before them, which they took. But they would have gone anyway.

And they did.

And now Henry felt bereft.

He reached down and rubbed his leg, swollen and painful from deep vein thrombosis. The industrial disease of international writers and airport academics. He reached up and felt his arm, wincing.

'How's it going?' Pawley asked.

'Bloody nurse,' said Henry.

'The Writers' Clinic has nurses now?' said Dr Bee.

'The nurse at the pathology lab who did my blood test. She waved the needle at me and said, "Little prick." So I said, just in joke, you know, "It's not that little." And she jabbed me. Viciously. Look at that bruise.'

He rolled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a large, purple haematosis.

'Nothing changes,' said Pawley. 'Enticement followed by humiliation. Just like the old days. But without the sexual act in between.'

'I'll pass,' said Dr Bee. 'I have no more wish than the nurse to view the details of your anatomy.'

Dr Bee was depressed. He glowered malignantly at the world around him. He picked up Henry's newspaper and turned to the obituaries.

'I remember the first thing my parents used to turn to in the local paper was the death notices. It gave them some satisfaction. Indeed, the only satisfaction they ever had, as far as I could see. Somebody else off the board. Somebody else's funeral you could make a point of not going to.'

There was a certain satisfaction in funerals. Especially of former colleagues. Either in refusing to attend, or in attending and catching a sight of the wives and mistresses and boyfriends and partners and offspring that had been concealed over the years. Hearing the ambiguous tributes delivered by other former colleagues who would hopefully soon be following them. But even they were getting less frequent, funerals and former colleagues, as one by one the former colleagues dropped dead.

'In the past,' Dr Bee said, as he found himself saying more often, since there wasn't much future to talk about, 'in the past when I felt like this, I would go out and buy new clothes. Raise my spirits that way.'

'You still can,' said Henry.

'No point,' said Dr Bee. 'I wouldn't get the wear out of them.'

'Wouldn't get the wear out of them?'

'Before I died. It would be a waste of money.'

Henry poured a drink with shaking hand. Shaken.

'That's a defeatist way of looking at it,' he said.

'Doesn't mean it's not true,' said Dr Bee.

'Buy cheaper clothes,' Pawley suggested. 'Then they might wear out before you croak. Anyway, they'll have got so tatty no one will take them at any of those second-hand charity shops. So it's not like they're such good clothes someone else will be walking around in them after you're dead. Creepy idea, when you come to think about it.'

Dr Bee shuddered involuntarily.

'Goose passing over your grave?' Henry asked.

'Quality's finished,' said Pawley. 'You haunt the supermarket malls anyway. So go and buy your clothes there. Changing rooms attached. All sorts of possibilities. Give up this obsession with quality. Those days are gone. Everything's cheap and disposable now. Like life itself. '

'Short, brutal and tragic,' said Henry.

'Exactly,' said Pawley. 'Got to face reality. A few weeks back there was a pair of pied oyster catchers on the beach. They just sat on the sand near the water's edge. I looked at them and they looked back at me.'

'Perfect communion,' said Dr Bee.

'They're an endangered species,' Pawley added.

'Like us,' said Henry.

'Exactly,' Pawley agreed. 'I got to wondering if they knew they were posted as endangered. I know that we are, though it's not been posted anywhere.'

'Oh, it has,' said Henry. 'At the university. Dead white males. Spelled out loud and clear.'

'Posted for extinction,' said Dr Bee lugubriously. 'Open season.'

'Nature tells you these things,' said Pawley.

'We already know,' said Dr Bee. 'We don't need nature telling us.'

Pawley shrugged.

'I do,' he said. 'It's calming. We could be scheduled for extinction and no one would raise a murmur till we'd gone. Been eliminated. Then they could express a certain satisfied sadness about it. But we'd be gone. Like all those other vanished species. We were nowhere. Then we were here. And then we were gone again.'

'I don't find that at all calming,' said Henry.

'Realistic, though,' said Pawley. 'At our age you've got to be realistic. Don’t buy green bananas. Keep the house clean. Do the dishes before you go out. Don't wear ragged underwear. You don't want to be found dead on the beach and have everyone discover how squalidly you lived.'

'I have no intention of being found either dead or alive on a beach,' said Dr Bee. 'Anyway, I can't see that it matters once you've dropped dead.'

'Reputation,' said Pawley. 'How you wish to be remembered.'

'I wish to be forgotten,' said Dr Bee.

'You won't be if they see your ragged underpants,' said Pawley. 'I think it's worth buying new ones even if you're not going to get full wear out of them.'

'And how will you be remembered? The man with feet of clay?' Dr Bee snapped, glowering at Pawley's Blundstone boots, mud-spattered and unpolished. The rural life.

'I don't want to be one of those sad old men with highly polished shoes,' Pawley explained. 'You see them, desperately keeping up appearances, blazer, cravat, golf jacket, polo shirt, trying to look like anyone still cares whether they live or die, trying to look like they're walking purposively somewhere. But they're not. They've nowhere to go. Nothing to do. The shoes are the give-away. Nothing else to do but polish shoes. Who would ever polish their shoes unless they had nothing else to do? Anyway, people mainly wear trainers these days.'

'Hideous,' said Henry.

They looked through the menu. They read the specials board. They read through them again and tried to figure out what they could eat without ill-effects.

'Remember when we used to order the *fritto misto*,' said Henry.

'Followed by mascarpone,' said Pawley.

'I preferred the tiramisu.'

'Those were the days,' said Pawley.

'As far as I am concerned,' said Dr Bee, 'they still are the days.'

He was on a new medication. He showed them the pill packet.

'I take a couple every night. Prophylactic measures. They give me the stomach of a twenty-year-old,' he told them.

'They don't,' said Pawley.

'I can eat anything without any ill effects.'

'That you know of,' said Pawley. 'But they're just suppressing the symptoms. You don't have the stomach of a twenty year old anymore. Or any other organs. They're all clapped out.'

'I no longer have indigestion all night.'

'Indigestion is nature's warning,' said Pawley. 'It lets you know you're eating the wrong things. You suppress the symptoms, you'll end up poisoning yourself. Give yourself ulcers. Diabetes. Colon cancer. It's the same as sexual appetite. Better be nauseated than -'

'Than what?' Dr Bee demanded.

'Than all those terrible things that happen to you when you think you have the genitalia of a twenty-year-old.'

'Safety in numbness,' said Henry.

The new female person wait-person came over, all cheeriness and lack of reverence.

'So what is it today, boys?'

'Boys!' Henry said, hollowly. 'Oh that we were!'

'Good old boys,' she offered.

Dr Bee glowered, giving his best shot at being a bad old boy.

He ordered garlic prawns followed by veal *parmigiano*. Henry went for *linguine vongole*. Pawley ordered sardines. Entree size.

'Given up the vegetarianism?' Dr Bee remarked.

'Up to a point. Got to stay alive. Can't be a vegetarian if you're dead. Sardines are a natural source of Omega 3. Better than taking pills. Oily fish at least twice a week are recommended for people who've survived a first heart attack. '

'But not for those who didn't,' Dr Bee surmised.

'Sardines, mackerel, swordfish,' Pawley added, undeterred. 'Especially in the first four months following an attack.'

'I threw all my pills away,' said Henry. 'I couldn't stand it. Every morning. Realising I was going to be doing this every day until I died. Just to stay alive. Counting them out. Breaking the soluble aspirin in half. Trying to remember which I'd taken. I bought a medicine box and within weeks it wasn't big enough. In the end I got so depressed I threw the lot away.'

'And became immediately better,' said Pawley, all new age therapies from the Valley of the Weed.

'I damn near died,' said Henry. 'Doctor had a fit when he checked me out.'

'He damn near died too?' Dr Bee asked.

'He's not that well,' Henry agreed. 'We compare symptoms. Everything I've got he seems to have had.'

'And you still go to him?' said Pawley.

'He's still alive,' said Henry.

'Even if in ill health.'

'But I figure he knows how to stay alive.'

'Or to stay ill,' Pawley persisted.

Henry shrugged. He poured a glass of mineral water and took a couple of warfarin tablets. Pawley produced his CoQ10. Dr Bee showed them his packet of Pariet.

'Oh, that it should come to this,' Henry said.

He poured the wine. An Italian Pinot Grigio. Now they were having to drink less they once in a while went for something more expensive than the house white from the Riverina. And Henry claimed Italian wines had fewer allergens than Australian wines. Anything to reduce the negative impact of lived experience.

'Here's to life after retirement.'

'Don't call it retirement,' said Pawley. 'Never use the R-word. No point in letting people think we're finished. Once they think you're finished you're out of the game. Never another invitation. No more international visitors. No one taking you to lunch. No more overseas travel. No more domestic travel. No, Henry, never surrender anything. You mightn't like the university. . . .'

'By the end I couldn't stand it,' said Henry.

'In the end is our beginning,' said Dr Bee.

'Doesn't matter. You don't have to actually go to it anymore.'

'He never went there that much anyway, that I could see,' Dr Bee remarked.

'Exactly,' said Pawley. 'Just keep up the connection. Ask them to give you an honorary associateship. Or an emeritus chair. Whatever you can get. Never say you're retired.'

'I never thought I'd hear you say this,' said Henry. 'You were always dying to get out.'

'True,' said Pawley. 'But no need to make it easy for the buggers. Don't want to make it look as if we're ready for the knacker's yard. Call it a change of emphasis. Focussed on writing, now.'

'I don't know,' said Henry. 'It would be like taking one of those adjunct professorships they hand out to dismissed bureaucrats and disgraced politicians.'

'Still time to disgrace yourself,' said Dr Bee. 'If you feel your novels haven't sufficiently done that.'

'Anyway, they don't mean anything.'

'Your novels?'

'Adjunct professorships. It would be embarrassing to have one. Mark of obloquy,' said Henry. 'No, I am a writer. Free at last to write what I want.'

'What's the point of trying to write a best-seller now? At your age,' Pawley asked.

'Fame, recognition, wealth,' said Dr Bee, derisively.

'He's too old for that,' said Pawley. 'It would kill him. Sex, drugs and air-travel. All the perils of celebrity. All the things he thought he wanted. At Henry's age they'd prove fatal.'

'I don't know about that,' said Henry. 'I'm no older than you.'

'Exactly,' said Pawley. 'My body can only just handle the drugs I can afford on my superannuation. If I had unlimited wealth, can you imagine what would happen?'

'I'm willing to take the risk,' said Henry.

'AIDS, heart-attack, thrombosis, NSU, gonorrhoea, syphilis, blackmail, divorce, alimony, palimony, addiction, madness,' Dr Bee listed.

'Nonetheless,' Pawley persisted, 'don't give up the university, otherwise you'll end up with nothing. It's like fishing.'

'Fishing?'

'A good spot on the river. Don't let it go. Don't let someone else grab it. The point is not to give the impression we've given up.'

'Why not?'

'To show we're still in business.'

'Examining PhDs from India is the only business I ever get offered.'

'Things turn up.'

'Invitations to participate in the acceleration of declining standards.' Henry shuddered. 'No way.'

'Why let the administrators and accountants and time-servers take over?'

'They already have.'

'Don't surrender to them, Henry. Don't give it away.'

'They're welcome to it.'

'You're making a mistake. You don't want to be seen to moulder.'

'I'm not mouldering.'

'You don't want to look like you're past it.'

'I am past it. As far as the university is involved.'

'So am I,' said Pawley. 'And have been for years. Decades. Longer even. Way past it. The world has passed me by. Hopefully. But there's no need to draw attention to that fact. I'm keeping my honorary associateship and my library card. And my shared room. Even if I never go into it. Can't fit into it anyway, there's five of us sharing it. But the point is, we don't want people thinking we're old and finished and washed up. As they will if we say we're retired. They'll dismiss us.'

'Dismiss us from where?'

'From notice. From participating. From life's grand designs.'

A chill wind blew along the street, driving leaves and blossoms and plastic bags before it.

'And are you still pursuing your researches with your associateship and your library card?' Dr Bee asked.

Pawley had devised a project to investigate the suspicious deaths of writers. Fulke Greville. Marlowe. Marvell. Shelley. Jack London. Lorca. Pasolini. It had been his ploy to stay on as an honorary associate. To show that he wasn't finished. But he was.

'Too depressing,' said Pawley. 'All killed by the secret state or the forces of reaction one way or another.'

'And you have the evidence?'

'Some of it. But I decided it was too defeatist. I'm switching to longevity. George Bernard Shaw. Jack Lindsay. Tolstoy. All vegetarians,' he added.

'Was Tolstoy a vegetarian?' Henry asked.

'Probably,' said Pawley. 'He lived a long time.'

'You are looking for the elixir of eternal life?' Dr Bee asked, less sceptical, more engaged. 'Dr Heidegger's experiment?'

'Not necessarily eternal,' said Pawley. 'But a bit longer.'

Henry stretched out his sore leg beside the table and massaged it.

'No more junkets,' Dr Bee remarked with grim satisfaction.

Henry bridled.

'It's long distance flying that puts you at risk. I can still get around locally.'

'But will anyone ask you?' Dr Bee asked. 'I seem to remember your saying you were more valued overseas than at home. Lots of copies sold in Serbia.'

'Doesn't necessarily mean I'm not valued here.'

'Not necessarily,' Dr Bee agreed.

'I refuse to give up,' Henry insisted.

'Your choice,' Dr Bee said. 'Personally, I can see little point in going on. Except to make sure I get more back from the pension fund than I put in. That gives me a certain satisfaction.'

'The secret of staying alive is to do something every day,' Pawley said. 'It doesn't matter what. As long as you do something. It doesn't need to be a lot. Just sticking a stamp on an envelope. You don't even have to write a letter. Do that another day. Address it another day again. Just as long as you retain an interest in staying alive.'

'I'm not sure I do,' Dr Bee said. 'I tried. I volunteered as a subject for drug testing.'

'Sounds fun,' said Pawley.

'It certainly wasn't. But I thought it might help my condition. Extend my life expectancy, such as it is. I stuck it for the last five years. Clinical trials. At the end of it they said even if it got FDA approval, they wouldn't prescribe it for me. I was at risk from the side-effects. And then it didn't get approval anyway. They were testing it in the States and apparently it had a lethal effect on blacks.'

'Afro-Americans we call them now,' said Pawley. 'So they put it into production immediately, presumably.'

'A touch of the old tar brush?' Henry said cheerfully, looking at Dr Bee carefully.

'Or a black Irishman?' Pawley offered.

'I was asked to write an article on staying alive,' said Henry.

'How far have you got?' Dr Bee asked. 'It could give a new meaning to the concept of a deadline.'

'Everybody finds it so amusing,' said Henry. 'My acupuncturist said "Coming alive, Henry, not staying alive. Take the opportunity to come alive."'

'She's quite right, of course,' said Pawley.

'She also said, "The gift the dead leave with us is the message to live."'

'Jesus,' said Dr Bee.

'Jesus especially,' Pawley agreed. 'But other teachers, too. Come alive, Henry. Let the dead bury the dead. Re-orient yourself. Abandon the negative. Love life.'

'While you still have it,' said Dr Bee. Heavily.

'Absolutely,' Pawley agreed.

'It's hard to imagine what for,' Dr Bee said.

'That's the challenge of it,' Pawley assured him. 'To discover the meaning of life. To live it to the full.'

'Golf?' Dr Bee inquired. 'Kayaking?'

'Enjoy, as the wait-people say,' said Henry, holding up his glass.

'That's the spirit,' said Pawley.

Dr Bee sighed in despair. He raised an arm and beckoned the wait-person over.

'See,' said Pawley, as she approached them, 'you're not defeated. You wave and they still come flocking. Or one at least. What's it going to be? An assignation? Or tiramisu?'

They watched as Dr Bee delved in his pockets. Who knew what prophylactic might pop out?

17: Teaching Writing

They arranged to meet somewhere different. Bring some excitement into these latter days. Henry suggested the Korean Barbeque, 'The Old Seoul.'

'The immortal soul,' the endlessly born-again Pawley agreed.

'Dead souls,' Dr Bee offered, 'lost souls, grilled sole.'

The fires of Hell.

Dr Bee's slaughtered cow sizzled on the grill on the table, succulently for Dr Bee, noxiously for Pawley. Henry expressed no opinion. It had been indicated to him that his opinions were better left unexpressed. Unanimously indicated by the Writers' Centre Director, by the Festival Director, by the Ministries, both Arts and Health, and, historically, by the University and his wife. He sat in momentary silence. Pawley had ordered dol sot bib-im-bab. Without meat. Egg?

'Up to four eggs a week are good for you,' Dr Bee informed them.

'They used to be bad for you,' said Henry.

'They've changed their mind. They've found they actually reduce cholesterol,' said Dr Bee.

'So do pistachio nuts,' said Pawley.

'I do not see them on the menu,' Dr Bee observed.

Pawley accepted egg. He couldn't bring himself to ask if it was free range.

Henry had followed Pawley and ordered bib-im-bab without the meat. He was avoiding red meat these days. More belated following of medical advice.

They shared a shallot pancake and Pawley closed his mind to the seafood in it. He displaced his anxiety into stirring the bib-im-bab furiously with his chopsticks to mix in the egg.

'And how is life in the world of arts control?' Pawley asked.

Henry broke his silence.

It was, he informed them, yet again, a world of its own, preoccupied with its own agendas. A fast growing endlessly busy network, a career path, an industry in itself. Whenever anyone wanted to justify government funding for the arts, they always came up with the argument for employment.

'Not control?' queried Pawley.

'Control?'

'That is the hidden agenda,' said Pawley. 'The inexpressible. The concealed purpose.'

'Hardly concealed,' said Dr Bee. 'Seems pretty obvious to me.'

'Arts funding provides jobs,' Henry informed them.

'Jobs for administrators,' said Dr Bee.

'If only,' said Henry. 'It's worse than that. Now they bang on about jobs for artists. Arts organizations are being geared to organize workshops for artists to teach. Never mind that they might not want to teach. Never mind that they would be happier occupied in writing or painting or performing or whatever they do best. Workshops and mentorships are mandatory because they provide employment, and employment is something that always concerns government bureaucrats. The government bureaucrats speak to the arts bureaucrats and they are all of one mind and one vocabulary.'

'Debased as it is.'

'Absolutely,' Henry agreed. 'And what they want is regular employment. None of this lazing on the beach and getting inspiration. None of this sitting at home drinking instant coffee and writing poems.'

'What about leisurely literary lunches?' Pawley asked.

'Absolutely not.'

'Verboten.'

'In a word,' said Henry. 'Get the bastards employed.'

'A revival of the nineteenth century workhouse principle,' Pawley observed, always one for the historical context. 'Gather the poor and indigent and oppressed and deranged and provident and sick -'

'How well you characterise the literary community,' said Dr Bee.

'- and put a roof over their heads and make the bastards work. Teach, wantons, teach.'

'Appalling,' Dr Bee agreed. 'A fate worse than death.'

'Yet we did it,' Pawley remarked.

'That was different,' said Henry. 'We taught literature. All these people are teaching creative writing courses. And not just at the Writers' Centre. At universities. Schools. Adult education. Correspondence colleges. Everywhere.'

'One senses a certain disapproval from your tone,' Dr Bee noted, waving a sliver of dead cow at him with his chopsticks.

'Disapproval?' said Henry. 'I'm appalled. They'd all be much better off reading books.'

'The teachers? Or the students?'

'All of them.'

'What sort of books?'

'Real books,' said Henry. 'Good books.'

'Your books?'

There was no denying it. Henry did not even attempt to.

'It was a happier world when there were fewer writers and more readers,' said Henry.

'For you.'

'Nothing wrong with solipsism,' said Henry. 'It's a disaster now,' he continued. 'In the past people took courses in literature.'

'Shakespeare. Milton.'

'Of course. But they would be studying some modern literature too. The novel.'

'Your novels.'

'Sometimes.'

'Though not often enough.'

Henry demurred.

'In what sort of numbers?' Dr Bee asked.

'Oh, you know -'

'I don't. That is why I'm asking.'

'It depended on the size of the class. Ten, twenty people maybe. If you got a text on a first year course, though, it could be seven hundred copies a year for three years.'

'Did you?'

'Bastards,' said Henry.

'I take that as a no.'

'And now,' said Henry, '187,000 students a year study creative writing. Think of the books they could have been buying.'

'Instead of writing their own.'

'It could have added up to millions.'

'And instead you inspired them with the wish to write.'

'I inspired them?'

'By your example. The louche glamour of your life. The wealth. The women. The drugs. The status.'

'They're too young to be writing. They should be reading. Learning how to write by reading.'

'Reading their betters.'

'There is no other way.'

'And do you read your betters?' Dr Bee inquired.

Henry gave him a hard look.

'I did teach literature for thirty something years.'

'Till you began teaching creative writing.'

'That was because they'd cancelled my literature courses. Bastards.'

It kept flooding back to him, the way his solicitous colleagues had 'rested' his courses, to use their hypocritical term. Like locking them away in a mental asylum till all memory had been obliterated by electric shock therapy.

'And do you still read in retirement?' Dr Bee asked.

'Don't use the R word,' Pawley reminded them.

'In whatever phrase Henry prefers to describe his current state.'

'"Full time writer" seems to be the preferred term,' Pawley offered.

Henry grunted.

'You don't like it?'

'Sounds a bit déclassé.'

'As if you have to write for your living?' Dr Bee suggested. 'Not the gentlemanly thing.'

'A slave to market forces,' Pawley glossed.

'I think people now would think that would be a good thing. Market forces rule supreme. No,' Henry continued, 'it's more a matter of not giving the impression of financial worry.'

'You prefer to imply a private income,' Dr Bee offered. 'Anything but work.'

'I think a stigma still attaches to the concept of honest toil,' said Henry.

'So you don't propose to do any.'

'The cult of the inspired amateur still holds sway?' Pawley asked.

'I don't know about amateur,' said Henry.

'But inspired?'

'Of course,' he agreed, shamelessly. 'And it's not that I don't work.'

'Two hours a day,' said Dr Bee. 'That, I believe you told us, was Thomas Mann's definition of the writer's working day.'

'The sensible ones,' said Henry.

'There are others who do more?'

'Yes, but do more than that, and it's no good.'

'Too hard? End up missing lunch?' Dr Bee inquired.

'No, the work's no good.'

'Is that so?'

'Definitely. Writers aren't concert pianists or gymnasts. They don't have to put in an eight hour day.'

'Who does an eight hour day now?' Pawley asked. 'That's all gone. First country in the world to introduce the eight hour day, and now everyone's working twelve, fifteen hours a day. Those who are working, that is.'

'Except for writers,' Dr Bee reminded him.

'Except for writers.'

'But they still call it work.'

'It's the intensity of it,' said Henry.

'Never mind the length, what about the quality?'

'Exactly.'

'Nice to be so precise,' said Dr Bee.

'It is,' Henry agreed. 'Anyway,' he continued, 'I have no guilt on that score. I've put in my time. Now, I have to tell myself, there is no necessity to force myself to keep on. I've done plenty. I've got plenty lined up waiting to publish. Why not reduce the stress?'

'And then you get stressed thinking about the 180,00 students a year not buying your books,' said Pawley.

'187,000,' Henry corrected him. 'Anyway, I'm not saying that some of them don't buy them,' he added, authorial wisdom holding sway, never imply a fading readership.

'But not enough.'

'Enough,' he insisted.

'But not as many as if they were forced to. By your presence on a list of set texts.'

'Exactly,' Henry agreed.

'You'd rather they learned to read but not to write. A policy proposed in Britain in the 1870s when compulsory education was being introduced. Teach the working classes to read instructions from their betters, but don't give them the techniques of writing back.'

'Of course I'm not proposing that.'

'Though it has some merit as an idea,' Dr Bee suggested.

'If you're implying there's a political conspiracy behind it all,' Henry said, 'for once I agree with you.'

'Of course there is,' said Pawley. 'There always is. Control. The most efficient way of control is ignorance. If you degrade education so no one learns anything, no one knows anything, there is no need for censorship. Your students just never encounter the radical history, the radical writers, the alternative, the choices; they don't even know the past existed or that there were any books in the past. Their ignorance serves to suppress the advances of the centuries. It's a calculated policy of dumbing down. Divert the young from reading books. Divert the middle-aged for that matter. That way they never encounter any subversive ideas. Any ideas, full stop. Creative writing is a way of occupying syllabus time, adult education time, at the expense of political education.'

'Bugger political education,' said Henry. 'I'm talking about literature.'

'Literature is political education,' said Pawley. 'That's why it's being run down in the universities. And in the culture generally.'

'And if it's not political education, it's not literature? Is that what you're saying?'

'Objectively, yes,' said Pawley. 'In practice. And it's all about practice.'

They picked at the side dishes, the kim-chi, the broccoli (good for everything, Pawley assured them), the shredded sugared turnip. They sipped at their miso soup. Swigged at their Hite beer.

'As I recall it, Henry,' Dr Bee said, 'weren't you privy to this political decision to introduce creative writing courses and cut out literature, when you introduced creative writing into the university?'

'I was manipulated,' said Henry. 'Looking back on it.'

'You sense a conspiracy,' said Pawley.

'I was invited to America to teach it. Creative writing.'

'America,' said Pawley, in careful tones.

'Yes, America.'

'You must have done something very bad,' said Dr Bee.

'And when I came back my literature courses had been closed down.'

'Rested,' said Pawley.

'Exactly. So. Even though I wasn't sure it was a good idea, what else could I do? Work up a whole batch of new courses and try and get them approved by the departmental committee? All that reading. New texts. No way.'

'A chance to read your betters,' said Dr Bee.

'But I just wanted to write. I was tired of reading other peoples' books.'

'You were perfect, Henry,' said Pawley.

'I know.'

'You sold out the pass.'

'Yes.'

'And now there's no one to read your books.'

'It's not as bad as that,' said Henry.

'Isn't it?

'Objectively,' said Henry, 'no, it isn't.'

'Good one,' said Pawley. 'You've got to think positively. If you think your readers have all gone, then surely they will be gone. What you think about, you draw to you.'

'Is that so?' said Henry.

'Yes.'

'Is that another piece of new age consciousness from the Northern Rivers?' Dr Bee asked. 'Should I think about sex all the time?'

'Don't you anyway?' said Henry.

'It's more the ancient wisdom than new age,' said Pawley, unperturbed.

'Rediscovered,' Henry added.

'I don't believe it was ever lost,' said Pawley. 'The tradition has always been carried forward through the centuries. You can't suppress truth.'

'Is that so?'

'You can try. But in the end truth triumphs.'

'But not books,' said Henry.

'Depends how true they are,' said Pawley.

18: Priests' Holes

Somewhere, at some conference for arts administrators, perhaps, one of those events organised to suck up the arts budget and avoid disbursing it to writers, or indeed to any artists at all, the Director had heard that there was money available for something or other. Capital works. Infrastructure. Heritage. Who knew what? She heard so much.

'We could get some of the writers' studios painted,' Henry said. 'Maybe put up some partitions and build some more.'

'More?' the Director said. 'We have enough trouble getting the rent out of the writers as it is.'

'Maybe take down the partitions, then, and get rid of them.'

'That's a better idea. The writers are nothing but trouble, coming down to the office all the time and wanting to use the photocopier without paying.'

'True,' said Henry.

'Losing their keys. Leaving the doors open at night.'

'Trying to score dope off the Criminal.'

'Don't even mention it.'

'Forget I said it.'

'Their studios are filthy, they never clean up.'

'Point taken,' said Henry. 'So who do we put in instead?'

'Oh, I don't know. Cognate organizations. It would be useful to have them close by.'

Arts bureaucracy was a growth area, and new arts organizations were springing up fast. Book Councils. Children's Book Councils. Copyright Councils. Playwrights' Guilds. Poets' Unions. Screen Writers Associations. And unlike writers, they seemed to have the funds to pay for office space.

They did a tour of the building to see what could be refurbished. Apart from painting, there wasn't a lot that could be done.

'We need more space,' said the Director.

'What about the outbuildings?' Henry asked.

'We can't get into them. They belong to the hospital.'

'Let's have a look.'

'They're locked up.'

'We can look through the windows.'

And they did. Peered into the old convict stone annex, paced round the wage-slave metal storage shed.

'All these buildings, why can't we use them?' Henry asked. 'No one else is. They're lying empty. What a waste.'

'What would you do with them, Henry?'

'We could use the shed as a warehouse. Set up a book distribution centre.'

'For what?'

'For when we set up a press.'

'Are we setting up a press?'

'Why not? It would be a great idea. I've always wanted to be a publisher.'

'Are you having trouble getting published, Henry? Is that it?'

'No, not at all. But you know, times are changing, literature's having a struggle. One day it might be necessary.'

He could see the day when he might run out of publishers, as one by one they were taken over and closed down or merged, and as more than one by one he managed to offend and alienate those that remained.

'How would we pay for a press?'

'I'll look into it,' he said. 'It's some way down the track.'

Sometimes even major literary identities had recourse to small presses. Even to self-publication. Times could be tough. It might be a way of reissuing his back-list. Protecting his future. Maybe a way to publish his essays, contributed each month to the magazine. They were already in digital form. So it wouldn't require expensive setting. Just a bit of formatting. Almost

ready to go. The sort of book the Centre should publish. And it would serve by way of experiment. Perfect justification. They could use it as a prototype to see whether a book from the new press would sell, whether it would get into the bookshops, whether they could get decent distribution for it. Maybe a link up with a major publisher for distribution. How would they fund it? Grants? Patrons? Sponsors? Debt? The Centre's funds? Embezzlement. He sighed.

Alternatively they could have a hand-press. The sort of thing Pawley was always going on about. Art production not commodity production. Fine printing and Marxism. William Morris and the Kelmscott Press. Jack Lindsay and the Fanfrolico. A nicely set selection of his stories would look well, hand-made paper. Get the Society of Bookbinders on the job to hand-bind them.

'So we don't need a warehouse.'

'What?'

'Wake up, Henry. You were drifting off. I worry about these signs of senescence.'

'I was just thinking about how we could set up a press.'

'Find the funds and tell me about it then.'

'Yes,' he agreed.

'In the meantime we don't need a warehouse.'

'We might. We could still use it. Distribution is the key to everything. We could set up an on-line distribution service. The way of the future.'

'You told me Amazon only made one quarterly profit in its first ten years.'

'Amazing, isn't it?' said Henry. 'Anyway, we don't have to make a profit.'

'Yes, we do.'

'Think of all those members who've got an attic full of books their publishers have remaindered. Just sitting there. Gathering dust and silverfish. And small press books. Self-published books the members put out. It would be good to get all that stuff into circulation.'

'You have an attic full of books. Henry?'

'Not full. But a few. It's not just me. Everyone does.'

'Even Tuscan Bayes?'

'Especially Tuscan Bayes. Cellars full.'

'Really,' said the Director. 'Well, they'd sell.'

'I doubt it,' Henry snapped.

'In that case what's the point of trying to distribute them?'

Henry harrumphed.

'Or were you just being bitchy?'

'Perhaps just a little,' he conceded.

She took another look through the shed windows.

'We could use it as a performance space,' she suggested.

Henry harrumphed some more. The hours he had endured at performance performances.

'Whatever,' he said.

They turned to the annex, the convict stone walls, the cedar window frames.

'We could turn this into accommodation,' Henry suggested.

'You need a home away from home?'

'I was thinking of visiting writers.'

'Like who?'

'Oh, I don't know. I'm sure I could think of someone.'

'I'm sure you could. Henry. But would they pay?'

'If they had travel funds, they would,' said Henry. 'Probably.'

'More taxpayers' money,' the Director sighed.

'Well, that's what we're looking to spend,' said Henry.

It took a while. But once the Director had settled on a project she could prove remorseless. She phoned the hospital administration, the Department of Lands, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Arts. E-mails and faxes flew through the airwaves or cyberspace or whatever they fly through. The months passed but she refused to give up. She was in expansionist move. Lebensraum. Anschluss.

A day was set. The Ministry of Arts would send someone out to inspect. Maybe even the Minister. Henry was summoned to be there to show them round. The Director laid in a superior brand of coffee and some fresh milk. The Criminal scrubbed the cups and saucers and selected the best of the unchipped ones. The magpies warbled cheerfully in the trees. The currawongs chorused the fine morning. The Director wore her most powerful power suit. Mascara, blusher, lipstick perfectly in place for encountering the Ministry.

And then the hospital refused to hand over the keys.

'But we've got the Minister coming,' said the Director.

'Can't help that. Not our Minister. We've had our instructions.'

'What instructions?'

'The buildings are needed.'

'But they're never used. What are they needed for?'

'A museum.'

'A museum? What sort of museum?'

'A museum of mental health medicine.'

'I can't believe it,' the Director said.

'It's on the drawing board now.'

'A museum of mental health medicine?' she repeated.

'It will be a unique historical resource.'

Henry shuddered. Blanched. The very thought of it. Straight-jackets. Restraints. Shackles. Electric shock machines. Surgeon's scalpels. Hacksaws. Syringes. Hoses.

'And they want to put it on display?' he said.

'So they say.'

'I can't believe it.'

'Nor can I,' said the Director. 'But that's what they say.'

The Ministry was phoned. The Minister's visit cancelled. Henry sat out on the veranda, holding a coffee he didn't want, forbidden by his acupuncturist. He drank it defiantly. The Director stood beside him. All dressed up and nowhere to go, reflected Henry, his shoes shined like an aimless old man. He loosened his tie.

The Director lit a cigarette. The match scoured the side of the box with the force of a convict era flogging. Or a medieval expulsion of devils. A classic exhibit in the museum of mental health medicine. Maybe they would have re-enactments.

She blew out an angry column of smoke, like Grendel's mother.

'Let's get lunch,' Henry suggested.

'I have work to do,' she said.

'Forget it,' Henry advised. 'They owe it to us.'

'Who owes us what?'

'The Ministry. The Government. Society,' he said.

'You sound like Tuscan Bayes,' she said.

'Why?'

'You're always going on about how he believes the world owes him a living.'

'If the world owes him a living,' said Henry, 'imagine what it owes us.'

'What?' she snapped.

'Lunch, at least,' said Henry. 'To begin with. And in perpetuity.'

She stamped out her cigarette on the veranda. Henry threw the remains of his coffee on the lawn.

'All right,' she agreed, 'lunch.'

'A long one,' Henry added.

'A two bottle one,' she assured him.

'So having decided to purge the writers out of their studios, you're now looking for some use for the rooms they've vacated,' said Pawley. 'Neat touch that, getting a writer to get rid of writers. No worrying issues of solidarity.'

'There is no solidarity among writers,' Henry assured him.

'And now you'll look for an office for yourself.'

'That's an idea,' said Henry.

'Which you hadn't, of course, thought of,' said Dr Bee.

'All you need is a desk and chair.'

'And couch,' Dr Bee added.

'Couch?'

'A day bed. For neophyte writers coming to be mentored.'

'I raised the issue, actually,' said Henry.

'Of the day bed?'

'Of an office.'

'And what was the response?'

'She said I could have a chair in the corner of the room. Everyone was in the same office, why should I be different? There wasn't enough space to give me an office of my own. I offered to take over the members' room, they never come in. She said we needed it for the library, that's where we kept the library. We'd have to cull the library if I insisted on it for an office. I said, I didn't mind library books on the walls. Nobody ever uses the library, anyway.'

'Don't let her cull the library, Henry, whatever you do. You don't need an office. People would only come and pester you and you'd get irritable.'

'Or they wouldn't come at all and you'd get depressed,' said Dr Bee. 'More realistically,' he added.

'What you really need to do is build up the library,' said Pawley. 'Everybody's cutting back on libraries. Cutting budgets. Throwing out books.'

'But the members never use the library.'

'Doesn't matter,' said Pawley. 'They will. Once all the other libraries in the city are closed down, they'll need it. You could get some decent dictionaries, for a start.'

'Who needs dictionaries anymore?' Henry asked. 'Everybody's got spell-check on their computers.'

'They're all American. You try and reprogram them to English or Australian and they default back to American. Same with paper sizes. Set for American. All part of their mission of cultural imperialism.'

'Would the Oxford Dictionary be allowed? Wouldn't that smack of an earlier cultural imperialism? Wouldn't it have to be the Macquarie?' Dr Bee asked.

'The Macquarie's usage based, that's the trouble,' said Henry. 'You need one on historical principles.'

'The Oxford,' said Dr Bee.

'But get the Macquarie on display so you look properly nationalistic,' said Pawley. 'And a Webster's to demonstrate loyalty.'

'Why do we need a Webster's when we've got American spelling in the spell-check programs?' asked Henry.

'Programs instead of programmes, I assume,' Dr Bee muttered, but they both sounded the same.

'To demonstrate your loyalty in an age of terror,' said Pawley. 'Put it conspicuously on display.'

'Like Henry's shelves of Kim Il Sung, Mao and Marx,' said Dr Bee.

'I've moved them,' said Henry.

'Been having a little book burning, have we?' Dr Bee asked.

'Not at all, I just took them off the shelves.'

'And put them where?'

'Never you mind,' said Henry.

'Opened your own deposit library, have you?' Pawley asked. 'Like the university libraries now. Put away anything radical or progressive and make it hard to find. Not actually destroyed, just deposited. The beauty of that is that with deposit and restricted access special collections, application, entry, use and duration are all recorded. Unlike the old open shelf system. Rather scary when you think of Homeland Security looking at reader borrowing patterns in US public libraries.'

'Or do you have them stored in one of those self-storage units?' Dr Bee inquired. 'Safely out of the house and office.'

'Or maybe in a secure cage in a hidden room cunningly constructed in your attic, like those priests' holes in sixteenth-century England?' Pawley suggested. 'No house should be without one.'

'Priests' holes,' Dr Bee reflected. 'Reminds me of that line of Browning's, "Monks' cowls and nuns' twats." Which by the way would make an excellent grab line for one of your festivals, Henry. Remember it next time you offer "Literature and the Sacred" or "Writing and the Body."'

'What else did you put in there, Henry?' Pawley asked. 'The *Koran*?'

'*Fanny Hill*, *The Story of O*, *My Secret Life*?' asked Dr Bee. '*The Complete Guide to Growing Marijuana*? *The Little Red Schoolbook*? All those treasures of the sixties?'

'In fact,' said Pawley, 'why don't you build one in the Centre?'

'Build what?'

'A priest's hole. Use the refurbishment funds. Chop off a bit of one of the rooms, put a concealed door somewhere, a tunnel through the roof, or the cellars, lots of potential. In fact,' Pawley continued, warming to his theme, 'I can see a growth industry here. Secret chambers to protect enemies of the secret state. Hiding places for people pursued because of their ideological

difference from the collusive conformity now demanded. Libraries are purged. The media is purged. Academics are early-retired.'

'Thank the Lord,' said Henry, reverently, thanking the Lord.

'Amen,' said Dr Bee.

'Maybe,' said Pawley, 'but by leaving, by taking the inducements to go, we have been complicit with the reactionary state that requires our absence. We have absented ourselves. And our books. No longer are the subversive libraries in our rooms accessible to students and colleagues and inquiring journalists. And it will get worse. Now they've got rid of us, they'll hunt us down. So yes, I can see a role for priests' holes in the near future. If not already. And why if we believe what we believe, if we believe, that is, that things are as we say they are, why are we not rapidly constructing priests' holes in every available building?'

'Maybe you should market the idea,' said Henry.

'That would be very smart,' said Pawley. 'Some things you don't advertise.'

'Word of mouth,' said Henry. 'Like books.

'And kill the builders,' Dr Bee recommended.

'Could be tricky. You'd have to keep recruiting more builders.'

'If you were doing it as a commercial operation you'd keep a team of builders.'

'Sworn to secrecy?' Henry ventured.

'Probably be best to have something over them. Just in case,' said Dr Bee.

'What sort of thing?'

'Some hold or other. Something discreditable.'

' Like they'd once written ideologically incorrect novels,' Pawley offered.

'Something like that,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Maybe it's the sort of thing that really has to be do-it-yourself,' Pawley reflected. 'I guess you could market plans. Post them on the internet. Or publish a book of classic priests' holes. It's no different to those little enclosures people used to have on their roof to grow dope. Still do have. Somewhere that can't be seen from the street or by the neighbours. Somewhere you get to through a kitchen window. But tiny. You don't want helicopters noticing it.' He went into reminiscent mode. 'We used to hide the dope plants amongst other stuff, herbs, tomatoes, ferns, ornamentals. Quite a little jungle. Maybe you should grow dope in the Writers' Union grounds. That would help with the cash flow.'

'The Criminal's probably already doing it,' said Henry.

'I might have a nose around,' said Pawley.

'No,' said Henry.

'No?'

'No.'

'Fair enough. But listen, Henry, even if you don't get the priests' holes built, make sure you get more library shelves put in. You've got to expand. Everywhere else libraries are throwing out books. It's the dark ages, Henry. Remember what they did at university?'

Henry remembered all too vividly. Outside the library row upon row of trestle tables with row upon row of books culled from the shelves, like turkeys culled after an outbreak of bird flu, multiple copies of Henry's books amongst them, a light drizzle falling upon them, dampening their bindings, staining their pages. And then the ones that no one bought consigned as land-fill, buried, penetrated by worms. Not even decently burned. Forget *Fahrenheit 451*.

'It's the biggest destruction of books since the dissolution of the monasteries.'

'What about the Third Reich?' Dr Bee queried.

'That, too.'

'That came later,' Dr Bee pointed out.

'Who cares what came when?' said Pawley, with uncharacteristic disregard for history, 'it's all happening again now. What you have to do, Henry, is build up the library.'

'I think that's rather encouraging,' said Dr Bee. 'Preserve the books but expel the writers from their studios. Liking smoking out bees from the hive to get their honey.'

'Everything's on-line now,' said Henry. 'It's all been digitalized.'

'That,' said Pawley, 'is the biggest lie of all. That is the ultimate control. That is the end of civilization as we know it.'

'Go on,' said Dr Bee, 'tell us.'

'The libraries are purged on the specious grounds of saving space and we're told everything is available on-line now. For a start, not everything is. The complete range of variant editions is never likely to be. Some things will get lost forever. And what has been digitalized isn't secure. They can just change the text at the stroke of a key. Hard to do that with books, you can't call in every copy ever printed. Someone somewhere will have the true text. Though with publishers using paper that decomposes in thirty years, even that's getting problematical.'

'So instead of dope you'll be smuggling in books as in the Reformation. Tyndale's Bible. The Geneva Bible,' Dr Bee speculated. 'Or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer,* and *Beautiful Losers* as in our times,' he added, though whether as an indication of spiritual degradation or liberal progress was not clear. Maybe just books he'd treasured in his formative years, the years when they were banned.

'It could come to that,' said Pawley. 'The aim of digitalization is to have only one source, and to have it easily changed. Forget unmediated pluralistic access to the web, that's the cover story. The reality is, they can rewrite history. And inevitably are doing.'

'So your answer is to return to the past of priests' holes and secret libraries,' said Dr Bee.

'Dialectics,' Pawley smiled.

On the grounds of imminent refurbishment they evicted the writers and repossessed their studios. Henry checked them out, despite the Director’s refusing his proposal to use one of them for an office. They were all horribly small, tucked up into the roof, hot and airless in summer, cold and draughty in winter, barely bigger than a priest's hole, indeed. He decided against appropriating any of them.

'It's a wonder the writers didn't keel over and die,' he said. 'Heat, cold, bird lice, bird flu, rabid bats, substance abuse, malnutrition. We could have advertised them as euthanasia facilities. With a plot in the Garden of Sweet Forgetfulness thrown in.'

'Euthanasia is still not legal,' the Director said, in campaign mode.

'Maybe it will be by the time the refurbishing gets done.'

In the meantime they found some cognate organizations that need a simple space, a token presence, an address of convenience.

'They're perfect,' she said. 'They never come in. They all work from home.'

Organizations devoted to haiku and human rights abroad and protesting the treatment of writers in foreign places and celebrating memorial days for national treasures best forgotten.

And silence reigned.

19: Pawley in Weed Shire

'I like country folk,' Pawley declared, on one of his visits back to urban life.

'We note your rural idiom of "folk",' said Dr Bee.

'So I'm happy up there.'

No one had asked him whether he was or wasn't. But with the simple clownish innocence of the rusticated, he told them anyway.

'You wave at all the motorists down the valley,' he explained.

'And they all wave back?'

'Not all of them. But you've got to wave at them all just in case one happens to be a neighbour. Otherwise you get wrong-footed.'

'Wrong-footed?' Henry asked. 'Do you wave with your leg? You've taken up barn-dancing? Or are you prancing the Sir Roger de Coverley?'

'Why not wave your genitals?' Dr Bee suggested.

‘I’m sure some do,’ said Henry.

'Community,' said Pawley. ‘It’s a good feeling.’

'Rural idiocy,' Dr Bee glossed.

'Well, it's all leavened by the alternative. It's the alternative centre of the nation, after all,' he assured them. 'Dope and new age.'

'In your case, dope and old age,' Dr Bee corrected. 'All playing at being rural folk, dope addicts and dopes alike.'

'That be right,' Pawley agreed.

'So you in turn can play at being an alternative type playing at being a rural folk person.'

'Aye,' Pawley agreed. 'It be great.'

Illusion and reality. Simultaneously.

'I've been thinking about cobwebs,' he told them. He brought his rural insights down to them, as other country folk might have brought bananas or cauliflowers or tomatoes from their cottage gardens.

'Of course you have,' said Dr Bee. 'What else?'

'You know, if you don't do anything about them, a house gets full of them. You don't notice, they creep up on you, and suddenly everywhere you look, every corner of the ceiling, every window frame, every light fitting, every convenient gradation of the rough-sacked plaster, is covered with them. And you feel bad, you know, sweeping them away, all that work by the spiders, spun out of their stomachs.'

'Like writers,' said Henry. 'I feel the stress in my stomach.'

'Exactly,' said Pawley.

'Exactly,' Dr Bee echoed, in utter amazement.

'You don't like to sweep all that work away. But you have to.'

'As with writers,' Dr Bee suggested.

'And I realized, a new web is sort of invisible, hard to see, anyway, high tech, like stealth bombers, the point is that flies and mosquitoes can't see it and so they get caught. But when the cobwebs get old they get covered with dust, all the extraordinary amount of dust we generate.'

'Like writers,' Dr Bee reiterated.

‘Fragments of human skin, wool fabric, cotton, whatever, and then they’re useless as cobwebs. All the dust sticks to their sticky surface and that makes them totally visible. So the flies and moths can avoid them. So you’re entitled to brush them down.’

‘Entitled,’ said Dr Bee, amazed yet again.

‘You just have to take care not to hurt any of the spiders.’

‘If only such care were taken about the plight of writers,’ said Henry.

‘You want him gently to dust away some of your productions?’ Dr Bee asked.

Pawley was becoming one of those irritatingly cheerful, loquacious old men who would launch into his observations at the drop of an Akubra hat, remembrances of things not sufficiently past at the check-out counter of the supermarket, the bottle-shop, the newsagent, the chemist, the organic food shop, the bakery, as the queue banked up behind him. He had found country ways appealing, eventually. Took a while. At first he had fumed at the slowness of it all. Till he realized, there's no hurry, what lies before me that I should hurry, only death, what does it matter, and it didn't, especially if you were stoned. So now he emulated what had momentarily, in his move from the city and the accumulated stress of employment and all the irritability that the job had brought, irritated him. The solution was to become the problem, he explained to Dr. Bee. Hang loose, as they used to say. Still did, up in Weed Shire.

'Tequila, when did I last drink tequila?' he asked at the bottle shop, seeing a row of it stacked behind the counter.

'Bad memories?' said the lady of mature years serving him.

'No memory at all.'

'Cold Duck,' she said, 'amazing what we used to drink back then.'

'What was that?'

'No idea,' she said, 'but we used to drink it.'

'Babycham,' he said.

She was unfamiliar with Babycham, that historic local brew of the English Midlands. Pawley enlightened her.

'Made out of pear juice. Back in the eighteenth century,' he expounded, 'they used to pass off perry as champagne in the country pubs. Pear juice. It's in *Tom Jones*.'

'Ah, Tom Jones,' she said. Was she fondly recalling the book, or the movie, or about to strip off her knickers and throw them at the image of the singer floating there? Bloody Welshman.

'So they invented this drink in the 1950s and all the girls used to drink it.'

Preparatory to throwing off their knickers.

'Can't say I remember it,' she said.

'Can't say I remember anything much,' said Pawley.

Then he would drive around, imagining he was in southern France, the Camargue, the delta flats of the Rhône; or Louisiana, in a James Lee Burke thriller, sugar cane, egrets nestling up to the cattle; or the West Midlands, Piers Plowman country, rich red soil, undulating little hills and villages and waterways. He could see the little people, the fairies, the gnomes, the nature spirits, see their presence, anyway, not precisely see them, not precisely anything, but feel their energy, like the amanita muscarias in *Piers Plowman* country.

'And you know what they were saying to me?' he asked.

'No,' said Dr Bee.

'Everything's going to be all right. That was the message. Everything's going to be all right.'

'Nature's message,' said Henry.

'We should be relieved,' said Dr Bee.

Not that it always seemed all right. One of Pawley's neighbours was having great fun with acoustics. He would run his trail bike up his hill and rev, not necessarily excessively, but at that certain spot where he generated an echo across the valley that was truly Zeus-like in its thunderousness, a massively amplified and post-digitally re-recorded wall of sound. The ingenuity of it.

Or did he not even know, the neighbour? Was he oblivious of the cosmic echo which at his point he didn't hear, wouldn't have heard anyway, helmet and ear mufflers on and the noise of the trail bike beneath him? Was he just having fun revving up the trail bike? Maybe Pawley's was the only vantage point to hear the amplified echo. Maybe it was a unique acoustic phenomenon. He could run *son et lumière*, get someone at the Writers Centre to write a script, Henry maybe. Make a fortune. Retirement, entrepreneurship, billionaire creative whiz.

Maybe not. It might be unique, but as the seed of Pawley's ascent into billionaire status, maybe not. Pretty well certainly not.

Winter dreams in the hot sun and the crisp air, finches twittering in the foliage, wrens, honeyeaters, grooving on in the Valley of the Weed.

Along the edge of the beach the sea kept up its constant inventiveness. Sometimes it trickled in gently, softly immersing the sand and as it receded bubbles of air rose and broke from the holes

the crabs had dug. Other times it roared in, pounding the beach with huge breakers. Out beyond the breaking waves a dark fin would break the surface and disappear again. Sometimes half a dozen or more dolphins would leap in sequence. Other times a black bulk would partially emerge as a whale rose and disappeared again. Mostly it was disappearance. The fins, the leap, the huge flurry of the whale's tail and the huge splash as if jumped and sank back, these were only momentary events. They suggested that beneath the surface things seethed and churned and boiled.

Sometimes there would be a sea eagle with a fish in its claws. Or beached jellyfish, stranded, dying. Wasps or bees, foundering, waterlogged. Dead frigate birds.

Other times there would be nothing to see at all. If there were any whales or dolphins they knew how to keep their heads down. Nothing broke the surface.

Wise, Pawley reflected. The wisdom of the deep.

This is the psyche, Pawley told himself, as so many others had told him. This is the unconscious. This is the unknown mind. This is everything yet to be confronted.

Sometimes the sand would be firm and easy to walk on. Other times it would be soft, his feet would sink down, holding his steps back, straining knees and ankles and tendons and ligaments. But even when the sand was firm it recorded footprints, his tracks stretching out parallel to the line of incoming waves. Sometimes waves washed over and obliterated the tracks, at other times trickled up to their edge and retreated.

At each end of the beach the moisture-laden air created a sort of mist, a soft expunging opaqueness. The cape to the south was engulfed and disappeared. The headland to the north was encompassed and lost in a haze. It was not exactly cloud. It was not a fog. Within it you might

not even notice it. But at a certain distance whatever it was, tactile humidity, suspended sea-spray, dust-cloud, sand-storm, it obliterated everything.

His steps stretched behind and before him. He followed a line of footprints that had preceded him. He could not have distinguished them from his own prints, the same angle of one step to the other, the same distinguishing length of toes and gap between big toe and the rest. Perhaps, like blood groups, there was only a small number of distinct foot types. Perhaps. But perhaps not. He looked more closely. He looked behind. The prints were consistent.

It was as if he were following his own trail, duplicating the tracks that already stretched ahead. But this was morning. If he had left tracks the night before, the tide would by now have obliterated them. These were as fresh as the ones he made as he followed them. He turned around. The tracks stretched back from where he had come. Yet not precisely so. He was following the line of earlier tracks, yet when he looked back, there was no second set of prints. There was no record of where he had just walked distinct from the tracks that led ahead. Nor was there any record ahead, of course, because he was yet to walk there. Just the one firm set of footprints. He took another pace. As he lifted his feet, the sand slid softly back down the edges of the imprint, sifting down in minor falls and implosions, until the surface was restored to the level of all around it and no trace remained. He watched each step as he took it. And each time the momentary track was dissolved. It was as if he were leaving no mark, as if the set of tracks already there were the track he had already taken and his movements now just the memory of a walk, the ghost impression of what had already happened. He walked ahead, to find out what it might have been, as the airborne sand and the moisture-laden wind softened all forms and edges and dissolved them there, his footsteps as light as vapour.

I have been this way before and I have no memory of it. I have no memory of whether I came this way just once or many times. The set of tracks spells out the way but gives no indication of how many times they have been set down. As soon as a step is taken all trace of it is wiped away. Only the one set of prints stays firm, and I follow along it.

At night he was woken by the sound of mice chewing. Then when he set the trap he was woken every night by the mouse rattling around inside. He was too soft-hearted to leave it fretting there. He would get up, walk down to the creek, deposit the mouse near its clayey banks, perfect for mouse-holes, or maybe snake-holes with snakes waiting for mice to eat. Above he would hear the fluttering menace of wings as an owl flew past. A risky world, little mouse.

In the morning he would wash the trap, trying to remove the pheromones so that the next victim would not be discouraged from entering by traces of fear.

The whole procedure provoked memories. Disturbing analogies. The bait. A piece of cheese? Peanut butter? He tried to recall the baits that had entrapped him in the past, then tried to forget about them before the memories became too awful. If it was the same mouse caught twenty-seven times Pawley could feel an empathy. A fellow mousey feeling. How he had fallen time and again for stale cheese.

Retirement had brought all that to an end, he reflected. No more cheesy traps. No more opportunities for self-incrimination with indiscreet proclamations. It made life a bit dull in these latter days. Safer but duller. A sadness in itself. Or was that yet another myopic delusion?

He considered going out and buying a Mao bust or a Guevara tea-shirt while they were still available. Best not, he reflected. Best find a convenient secret hole down by the creek and dig down deep.

Nonetheless, he went over to his CD collection. Shostakovich, Frank Bridge, Maurizio Pollini. Something from the years of commitment to keep his spirits raised.

20: Knee-capping

Henry sat in the Golden Bowl glowering as Pawley and Dr Bee arrived. He scrutinized their expressions to detect whether they had seen the weekend papers and the bad review of Henry's latest in one of them. He fluctuated between surges of incandescent rage and the cool containment of lordly disdain. Such things should not disturb one. But they did. Both Pawley and Dr Bee denied reading the press. So did Henry. But that did not preclude the odd glance at a paper. Over someone's shoulder. Discarded on a chair in a doctor's surgery. Abandoned on a bus seat. Crumpled in a rubbish bin. For that matter they might have been lying, and been regularly reading the papers without admitting it.

He could tell nothing from their expressions. He waited for their conversation to give them away but all Dr Bee talked about was the thrill of the chase, whether of wild pigs or young women Henry neither knew nor cared. And all Pawley talked about was imperialist wars in the Middle East, whether the Crusades, the 19th century, the 20th century or the present day, Henry failed to register. All the same war, Pawley would have said, anyway, probably was saying it at that very moment. But Henry remained distracted, waiting for the wine to be poured before broaching the subject. His subject. The house white in these days of retirement and economic stringency. Except for occasions of celebration. This was not an occasion of celebration.

In the end Henry had to introduce the topic since they either had not noticed or were being scrupulously tactful.

'Who wrote it?' Dr Bee asked.

'Some wretched little weasel.'

'Whose name you forget.'

'Yes.'

'Or suppress.'

'Never knew it.'

'Deep into denial, are we?' Pawley asked.

'One of ours, was it?' said Dr Bee.

'What do you mean, one of ours?'

'Used to be a student. Or tutor. Something or other. He was around and then he went.'

'Another failed academic,' Henry snorted.

'Aren't all academics failures by definition?' asked Dr Bee.

'Speak for yourself,' said Henry.

'I do,' said Dr Bee. 'But I speak for all of us, too.'

'Communality,' said Pawley approvingly.

'Why do they hate me so?' Henry asked. 'I don't even know the wretch. Never even met him that I can remember.'

'But he no doubt knows you,' said Dr Bee. 'He no doubt met you and met your dis-remembrance.'

'And you never did him any favours,' said Pawley. 'You're sure you never helped advance his career?

'No.'

'So why would he attack you?'

'Perhaps he didn't like the book,' said Dr Bee.

Henry glared.

'A failure of taste on his part and of education on ours, I hasten to add,' Dr Bee hastened to add.

'Probably never even read it,' said Pawley, more emolliently. 'The press,' he said, as if no more need be said. The Press. Imperialism. Control. War. 'You know what reviewers are like. You've been one yourself,' he couldn't resist adding.

'I never reviewed a book I hadn't read,' said Henry.

'Read it? I haven't even lectured on it,' Dr Bee tossed in. They had to reiterate these phrases once in a while, give them currency, bring them out into the light like some collector looking over his old coins or rare jade. Mantras that required repetition, liturgies to keep it all in place, ensure the continuity of a culture in a context that seemed intent on destroying it.

'Never mind,' said Pawley. 'As long as he spelled your name right. Which you always assure us is the only thing that matters.'

Henry grunted.

'Or did he get that wrong too?'

The waiter came over, drawn by their anguish.

'Everything all right?'

'No,' they assured him.

He brought them a limoncello each on the house.

Henry was still fuming when he reached the Writers' Centre. The house white had not mellowed him. It had stoked rather than quenched his flames of rage. And instead of striking him comatose, as had been known to happen, the limoncello had, if anything, sharpened up his taste for combat.

'Henry!' said the Director. 'What is the matter? You look impassioned.'

'Ever hopeful,' muttered the Criminal at his work station.

The Director whacked him a couple of times on the knuckles with a ruler from his desk kept there for that purpose.

'Do it again but slower,' said the Criminal.

She smoothed down Henry's tousled hair, brushed away some of his writer's dandruff from his shoulders, cluck clucking at it as she always did.

'Dandruff is the insignia of a writer in Britain,' he told her.

'But we're not in Britain.'

'Still got the same Queen, though,' he said, to rub a bit of salt into the wounds of her frustrated Republican sentiments.

He slumped down into a chair. On the desk was the reviews section of the offending paper. Henry crumpled it up and tossed it onto a rubbish bin.

'Henry! That's our library copy.'

'It isn't now,' he said, pushing it further into the bin.

The Criminal opened his drawer and produced a Writers' Centre book of matches which he offered to Henry.

The Director whacked him on the knuckles again. The Criminal. Henry thrust his hands into his pockets as a precaution.

'What's got into you?' she said.

He was withdrawn into speechlessness. But his eyes gave him away, straying to the rubbish bin.

'Oh, poor old Blokey O'Kee!'

'Who?'

'Your review.'

'Not my review.'

'The review of your book.'

He grunted.

'It was rather - .' She searched for words.

'Rather?'

'I'm not sure how to put it.'

He stood up and took the two volume *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* from the shelf and handed it to her.

'Try this.'

'At least it hasn't dampened your wit,' she said, carefully putting down the two volumes onto her desk, how to avoid back injury when heavy-lifting.

Henry laughed, bitterly. The bitter laugh of the badly-reviewed novelist, a distinctive cry.

'I wouldn't worry about it,' she said, 'he's rather a sad figure. We went through uni together. You must have taught him.'

'Never heard of him.'

'He was a mature student. He came from an earlier generation. He'd never learned to type. Never learned to drive a car. A propelling pencil was the height of his high-tech skills.'

'Never learned to write, either,' Henry added. 'Or read.'

'Oh, Henry. Don't be uncharitable. He became a failed priest.'

'How do you become a failed priest?' Henry snapped. 'Write a doctorate on the novels of Graham Greene?'

'Don't be so pedantic, Henry. He tried to become a priest, and didn't make it.'

'Like putting B. A. Calcutta (failed) after your name.'

'If you want to, Henry. Should I print you some new business cards?'

'Failed priest,' Henry growled. 'That explains everything.'

'He left the church and took up bicycling.'

'On his acupuncturist's advice?'

'He wrote a book about it.'

'About being a failed priest? How many more of them can the literary world sustain?'

'About bicycling.'

'Ah!' said Henry. 'A pedalphiliac.'

The Director smiled. A trifle thinly, but still a smile. But it was a better reaction than being suspected of homophobia and getting a sharp rap on the knuckles. Let alone on his other less public parts.

'You want me to put a spoke in his wheel?' the Criminal asked. 'Get him knee-capped.'

'Knee-capped?'

'Put an end to his filthy habits.'

'The ones he wears or the ones he practices?' Henry asked.

'Whichever,' said the Criminal. 'Just say the word and it's done.'

'Oh, who will rid me of this pedalphiliac priest?' Henry intoned.

'They don't stand for pedalphiliacs in jail,' said the Criminal.

'You can't do that,' said the Director in alarm. 'They'll stop your day release.'

'That's my problem,' said the Criminal.

'Then where would we be in the office?'

'Don't worry,' said the Criminal. 'Who said anything about me doing anything?'

'Just make sure you don't,' she said.

'My hands are clean,' he said, showing them, cracking his knuckles. They seemed to be tattooed, but whether merely ink or stencils or real tattoos, Henry did not want to know.

'So,' said the Criminal.

'It's a thought,' said Henry.

'Just say the word and it's a deed.'

'How?'

'You don't need to know how. I've still got a few favours to call in.'

'You better find how much it will cost first, Henry,' the Director warned him, a conscientious administrator's sense of fiscal responsibility before everything.

'No cost,' said the Criminal. 'Strictly favour for favour. No cash. No paper trail. No tax. No GST.'

'What sort of favour?' Henry asked.

'Won't know till I need it, will I?' said the Criminal.

'Need it? Like what? A kidney transplant?'

'Nothing wrong with my kidneys,' said the Criminal.

'I don't know,' said Henry. 'I'll have to think about it.'

'Consider it done,' said the Criminal.

'I see your bad reviewer came to a sticky end,' said Dr Bee.

'No.'

'Don't you read the weekend papers?'

'No,' said Henry. 'Not that one. Never again.'

'Ah, well, nor do I,' said Dr Bee. 'But I couldn't miss that.'

'Miss what?'

'Misadventure. Hit and run. Got knocked off his bicycle into a ditch.'

'Shit,' said Henry.

'Indeed it was. All over. He was cycling through the country. Ended up covered in cattle shit. Slurry, they call it.'

'Ah, well,' said Henry. 'The ways of the Lord are mysterious, particularly to those who have turned from him. Was he hurt?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Maybe that'll stop him writing any more bad reviews.'

'I doubt it,' said Dr Bee. 'Shattered knee-caps. Won't be able to bicycle for a while. If ever. But his wrists are all right. He'll still be able to write. And he'll have a lot more time on his hands so he'll be able to review a lot more.'

'Of course,' said Pawley, 'you realize poor old Blokey O'Kee was just the hired assassin. The person who really had it in for you was the person who hired him.'

'Go on,' said Henry.

'The reviews editor, obviously,' said Pawley. 'He's the one who would have chosen Blokey. He would have looked for someone who would give you a bad review.'

'I guess so,' said Henry.

'You taking out a contract on him too?'

'I didn't take out a contract,' said Henry.

'Just a form of words,' said Pawley. 'But you know what I mean.'

'I didn't ask for it to happen,' said Henry.

'Still, never look a gift horse in the mouth.'

The Criminal put his finger to the side of his nose in a gesture of silence, and gave Henry a broad smile. All missing teeth and tongue stud.

'Anything else I can do for you?' he asked. 'Get you some dope, maybe?'

'I don't know,' said Henry.

'Consider it done,' said the Criminal.

21: Refusal

There had always been something of the girl who just couldn't say no about Henry. He had been known to sing it in the shower. 'I'm just a girl who can't say no.' His acupuncturist had advised him to sing. Good for the upper body. Relax the diaphragm. Get the energies circulating. Release him from the things he needed to be released from. Like refusal. It hurt him to refuse. Launch

this book, judge this competition, address this gathering, be on this committee. It had always been the same. In the past even more difficult. When there had been more invitations. Girls, too.

Lately the invitations had dropped off, and had ceased altogether from girls, pretty well; from girls anyway, older women still batted the odd weary eyelid. And now that he seemed less and less often on the A list, it hurt him even more to say No. If he said No too often, mightn't he cease to exist? At least in the consciousness of arts bureaucrats and media editors. He did not want to cease to exist. And was there any other existence?

But nor did he want to examine Ph. Ds. He could refuse them with hardly a qualm. They had always been hell to deal with. But even an invitation to hell was an invitation. The assurance that someone wanted him. Even if it was down there. No matter how old he got, and each day it seemed that he was getting irrevocably older, he resented the way other people were invited to things and he wasn't. That intensely private person Tuscan Bayes was endlessly popping up in the press or on television, delivering addresses as a public intellectual, writing opera libretti, proclaiming his lack of thought on issues of yesterday, Francesca Templar poppeting up there with him.

Henry felt it all deeply sickening. Even things he wouldn't have wanted to do. And that was most of them.

Like examining Ph. Ds. And not just the ones that endlessly streamed in from India. Now there were all the Creative Writing doctorates, always with a second volume of appalling critical theory. As he had told the Vice-Chancellor at one of his increasingly rare invited public appearances, he never read the exegesis part. Waste of time. Worse than that, it was destructive to the psyche, to the creative spirit, for writers to explore the sources of their own creativity. Some things should be left unexplored. Left to trust and faith. It was unfair to the candidate,

making them do that. It had only been introduced because academics didn't know how to assess fiction on its own.

He hadn't realized it was the Vice-Chancellor. He had thought it was another guest who had arrived early. Or maybe one of the attendants hovering discreetly at the entrance. Unmemorable, unobtrusive sort of chap, but friendly enough. Never would have picked him for a Vice-Chancellor. It could have been the last official function he would ever be invited to, Henry reflected. Very likely the last Ph. D. he would be asked to examine. Which wasn't a bad thing, after all.

And yet it was a circuit. No doubt about that. And how many circuits were left to him? If you wanted to mix with the British Council and Arts Council of Great Britain types, the international roaming literati and the power brokers, then you had to accept the invitation to judge the Commonwealth novel prize or the Asian Book award. A step up from the State awards. He'd done that. And what a nightmare that had been. And now he should climb higher? He'd done his weeks in Asia. Alcohol expensive. Dope prohibited under pain of death. High humidity. Economy class flight. Had it been worth it? Just to be somewhere else, just to know you were still on a circuit? No way, he tried to tell himself, no way. Block up your ears with wax, strap yourself to the mast, and refuse temptation. Anyway, he wanted to be on the other side of the judging panel, the being judged, or even more, the being awarded. He wanted to be invited to receive prizes, not hand them out.

It was a matter of getting these things clear. Do you want literary power? he asked himself. Well. All power corrupts, but it was tempting. But didn't he want awards more? Rewards. Like prize money. Fame. The concomitant increased sales. Concomitant. Who else

would incorporate a word like concomitant in a wish list? he asked himself. Am I losing my bearings, am I adrift?

Was his judgement after all so valuable? So reliable? Did he even know any more what was any good? Wouldn't he probably automatically hate it? The old guard resisting the new? He didn't want to be cast in that role. He wasn't sure that he wanted to open the floodgates to the new, either. Too many of them.

It all involved too much self-examination. Every invitation to do anything.

Just sit down and write, he tried to tell himself.

But he had been sitting down and writing for so many years. The temptation of being busy and looking important, or at least valued, and the buzz of buzzing around the world beckoned him. But the discomfort, of course. Never forget the discomfort. The indignities of airport security checks. The engineered viruses in the air conditioning systems. The recurrent cases of poisoning on board, whether by contaminated cut-price food or by security agency personnel sitting beside you.

Let alone the discomfort of reading six hundred stories. Or sixty-seven novels. Like examining first-year university again. Or final year theses. A nightmare.

He considered the appeal of civic responsibility. Someone has to do it. It is better it is done well and responsibly. Except that he wasn't sure anybody had to do any of it. Nor was he sure he could do it well or responsibly.

But the anguish of turning things down, of saying no, still remained. Was it something going back to his childhood, his parents? Wasn't everything? Was it an insecurity about acceptance, a fear of never being invited to anything again? Yet why not be discriminating? Only hold onto a fear of never being invited to anything good. A fear of being dropped from the A list.

He did fear that, didn't he? Didn't everybody? Didn't even those on the 'A' list have an anxiety about being relegated to 'B' division? Henry didn't know. He just knew his own anxieties, which appalled him in their nakedness and transparency and low-level crassness: greed, status, power, sales, acclaim. And he didn't want to be like that. He really wasn't like that, the real Henry, was he?

Surely he had been tougher once. Untempted. Disdaining all distractions. Refusing radio, television drama, film adaptations, all hackwork for other peoples' projects, he had decided at the time. These days he was not so sure. He had come to suspect the only work that was valued was hackwork. That or nothing. That or you didn't exist.

It paid well. These unnecessary things paid well, and the fiction in comparison didn't. But fiction was necessary. Wasn't it? Wasn't that what mattered? On the other hand, what was wrong with well-paid ephemera? Belles lettres. Trivia. Life-style pieces. Travelogues. After all, it might get your name sufficiently up in lights to sell more of the necessary fiction. It might. But there again, it might not.

That had been when Henry's high-minded resolve had first broken. When the high-minded confidence of youth which had always refused these marginalia, or nearly always, faltered. And he began to say yes, more and more often.

But did he need to continue to?

Couldn't he just be discriminating?

But were his discriminations correct any more? Did he know what worked in the market place? And was there any other place anymore? Well, yes, there was, the circuit of judging, the circuit of teaching creative writing, and all that. But a world of recognized literary value? Like in the old days? He rather felt those days had gone altogether.

He sat at his writer's desk encased in negation. Outside his writer's view had vanished, nothing but a grey drizzle obscuring everything, excluding everything, all the rude scribblings of nature learning to write erased. There were no invitations in the mail. He had refused too many things too often. Nothing in the email except offers of sex aids and medications. The phone stayed silent. No call from the Director to meet some visiting writer. Neither Dr Bee nor Pawley called with suggestions of lunch.

He refused to phone them himself.

He sat there, silent, alone.

The great refusal achieved at last.

The famous literary hermit.

The intensely private person.

Was there any publicity gain in this image? Was it selling more books?

Did anyone one even know?

Or care?

22: You Are Writer

The downside of retirement was that in not going to work anywhere, you did not regularly and automatically meet any fellow wage-slaves, eager to rush off and have a long lunch with you. Or even a short one. Pawley was spending more and more time on his lantana farm up in the bush. And Dr Bee, who knew what Dr Bee was doing? The last time Henry had seen him had been from the window of a bus down the seedy end of town, standing outside a shop whose window

declared 'All Your Oriental Needs Supplied.' All of them? Really? And then the bus had shuddered forward and Henry never knew whether Dr Bee had remained standing outside like an ageing Heathcliff, or had entered and been supplied.

He phoned Dr Bee and delivered his lament.

'Bad as employment was,' he said, 'it was at least a place to meet.'

'Ah, meat!' said Dr Bee. 'You are missing the young flesh that university supplied.'

'It's not that,' said Henry.

'Of course it is,' said Dr Bee. 'We are still human even if retired. We still have our desires and needs to fulfil.'

'Oriental ones?'

'Whatever turns you on,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't think of university as a flesh market.'

'Oh, yes, you do,' said Dr Bee. 'Or did. It was our equivalent of Hollywood. "A business that would feel lost if it didn't have a dozen or so women to 'introduce' every year." I quote,' he added, meticulous as ever in attribution, no point courting the opprobrium of plagiarism charges.

'You quote? What from?'

'The life of Nicole Kidman.'

'What on earth are you reading that for?'

'Media studies,' said Dr Bee.

'What media studies?'

'Our former Department of English Language and Literature, you may not have noticed since you claim no longer to enter its portals, is now designated the School of Letters, Art and

Media. On the lam as hardened criminals used to say in those quaint old Pinewood movies. Or perhaps Solaam, to court our Islamic brethren and the oil producers.'

'And you're conscientiously keeping up to date with advances in the discipline by buying biographies of movie stars.'

'Who said anything about buying?' Dr Bee asked. 'I settle on a sofa at the local chain store book emporium. A cup of tea beside me. A recipe book open to transcribe anything that looks interesting. A biography of a movie star, as you put it, to stir up the testosterone. And I survey the mid-morning trade. Mid-afternoon, too, if it's good.'

'A boulevardier of the shopping malls,' said Henry.

'It has its rewards,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't believe you.'

'There are also the satisfactions of prurience. I quote again: "gingery pubic hair, small breasts, and boyish hips." Not being a vegetarian I omit the reference to the beanpole figure. Unappealing to us carnivores.'

'I didn't know she was ginger.'

'Gingery,' Dr Bee corrected him. 'A slight but subtle difference. Just that little more salaciously suggestive, don't you feel?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Henry.

'Oh, yes, you would. It is your trade, after all.'

'Trade? What trade?'

'Trade, what trade? Methinks you do protest too much. I was merely referring to the writer's trade. But your reaction suggests an anxiety about accusations of other trades. Traders in the flesh, perhaps.'

'I have no interest in flesh.' said Henry.

'I find that hard to believe,' said Dr Bee.

'You reach a certain age and you ask yourself, what for? You look at those sad old men compulsively chasing after young women. Year after year. And you know how it's going to turn out. Boredom. Recrimination. Parting. Retribution. Every time. Sometimes one aspect more painful than the others. Or more expensive. It's not worth it. I don't see the appeal.'

'How sad,' said Dr Bee. 'Those young unformed minds and fully formed bodies no longer turn you on?'

'Their fatuous sentiments. Ill-informed beliefs. Cultural ignorance. Wanton prejudice. I can't go through hearing all that again.'

'Get foreign ones.'

'Foreign what?'

'Sex-workers. Then you don't have to take any notice of what they say because it's in some language you can't understand.'

'What sort of language?'

'You don't need to know. Indeed you probably wouldn't want to know.'

'I certainly don't want to know,' said Henry.

'The sad words of a sad old man.'

'I am not sad.'

'Old, anyway. You're certainly old, Henry. Acting old. Prematurely old, from my experience,' Dr Bee added. 'You're not too old to give it a try. Phone up one of those import agencies. Immigration lawyers. Put them on the books of the Writers' Clinic. Casual staff.

Personal trainers. Surrogate therapy. Pay them. Strictly a cash transaction. You just call them up when you need them. They've got enough English to understand that.'

'But not much more.'

'Not a lot, no.'

'I find the whole topic distasteful,.'

'There you are then,' said Dr Bee. 'Go for it.'

He was not available for lunch. 'Pressing business,' he added, leaving Henry to brood on what it might be that waited to be pressed.

Henry tried dropping in at the Centre, but the Director shooed him off even as he entered the door.

'I have a deadline,' she announced, 'I'm frightfully busy, what is it you want, Henry?'

What he wanted was relaxed companionship over a glass or two of wine, a light lunch, gossip, chit-chat, the novelist's raw material, but she sat there determinedly with her apple and banana and some plastic box of bean-sprouts and green leaves beside her, branches of wattle and bottle brush shedding pollen and petals and more green leaves around her

He drove off in some irritation. How could everybody be so busy? Even when he was writing a novel he had never been that busy. Indeed, especially when writing a novel, he liked to get out of the house as soon as he'd done his day's quota of words. Rush off for relaxation. He knew the rushing wasn't good, but the relaxation was. Even though his acupuncturist complained about that, too. 'One glass of wine perhaps, Henry, but more than that, no.' He didn't agree. In fact he would reward himself today with a bottle to himself. And a good one. None of this half carafe of house wine. And buying it by the glass was ridiculously expensive. A bottle was the only way to go. That was why wine was supplied in bottles. The natural measure.

The Casa Nostra had been one of the Director's discoveries. Even so the food was surprisingly good. The Director tended to go more for ambience than the food and the wine list. Lithe young waiters, waiters of the sort from when the word was gender specific. Not out of work actors, either, but real waiters. The sort who used to be at your side lighting your cigarette as soon as you'd taken out your packet, in those days before lighting a cigarette was a $5,000 offence. Now they just stood behind her and squeezed her shoulders in some quasi-massage. All your oriental needs supplied.

He was a little uncertain about the Casa Nostra. More Puzo's Godfather than the Master's Golden Bowl. He was a little uncertain about many things, anyway, so he felt no more than the usual apprehension that characterized most life experiences. Death ones too, probably. The Maseratis and Ferraris occasionally parked outside, the men with gold chains and designer sun-glasses inside. Even so, he was happy to have them there as local colour. Though the table of retired police chiefs one Friday he had found a bit alarming. Similarly the group of prison officers the Director had pointed out to him, familiar to her from the writing classes she had taught in jail. It was the combination. Crime and punishment, organized crime one day, organized crime prevention another. There was a fearful symmetry to it.

'They have no choice,' the padrone told him, when one table of regulars disappeared. 'Nice fellows. Hundred dollar tips. But the police -.' He shrugged. 'They won't let them give up.'

Now they were locked away, their table empty, preserved with a permanent reserved sign, waiting for their release.

'Anywhere, Henry,' the padrone called out, standing behind the espresso machine. Henry found himself a table in a corner. On his own he tended to go for corners. Dr Bee and Pawley preferred the window and a view of the passing parade. But the passing parade could look back in as well as be looked out upon. Henry still had the ancient residual anxiety about being seen eating alone. What, no friends! What a lonely old man you've become, Henry. Isolated and curmudgeonly.

He opened his newspaper and buried himself in it. Even the unthought language of diurnal existence carried its presaging freight of death.

The waitress came up and he ordered an imported Pinot Grigio.

'A glass?' she asked.

She was a new waitress.

'Bottle,' he said sternly.

'Small carafe?' she asked.

'No,' said Henry impatiently. 'Bottle.'

She made one of those female wait-person faces, somewhere between disapproval and mirth and admiration, and went off.

So, a new female wait-person, the times they were a-changing. But not all change was malign. He must mention it to Dr Bee, entice him out for lunch again. How could he claim to be busy? What could he possibly be doing? What could there possibly be for him to do?

'You are writer!' the waitress said, returning with the bottle, opening it dextrously, pouring him a few centimetres to sniff and taste.

He sniffed and tasted. Nodded. Swallowed.

'Yes,' he said.

It was nice to be recognised. Sometimes. Henry Lancaster, well-known novelist. To have your role as a regular. A celebrity, even, Your preferred table. Along with the local capo and the local cops. And it was good sometimes to be alone, without Pawley's mocking, or Dr Bee's muttering 'scribble, scribble, scribble.'

'I want to write,' she said.

'Yes?'

'Yes,' she said. 'My life story. It is so interesting. But is difficult. The English, you know.'

He nodded. Yes, he knew. A lifetime spent wrestling with it in all its ambiguities and treacheries and allusiveness.

'Maybe I dictate to someone,' she said.

He registered danger. There was no way he was going to be sucked into remedial English teaching. Or even into advance mentorship. Any sort of teaching. Those days had gone. There had been quite enough of them. Retirement might look empty, lonely old codger lunching alone. But there were a lot of things worse than lunching alone. And teaching was high upon the list of worse things.

And he wasn't bereft. He might look vulnerable and unprotected, strayed from the pack, out beyond the fringes of the herd and vulnerable to any vigorous young predator. But age had its store of wisdom. He still had a few tricks up his sleeve. A lifetime at university had taught him the skills of evasion and delegation.

'You should visit the Writers' Centre,' he said. 'They will help you.'

'They will help me, how?'

'Give them a go,' said Henry. 'They have workshops.'

'Workshops?'

'Courses, you know. How to write. How to write your life story. Very popular. It's just up the road,' he added, as an incentive. 'No distance.'

She took out the pen from her apron pocket and the little note-pad on which she wrote down orders. And then she pulled out a chair from the table and sat down beside him.

'You tell me,' she said.

'Writers' Centre,' he told her. 'Ask for the Director. Tell her I told you to call her.'

That would pay her back for shooing him out.

He sat back in the glow of writerly recognition. It had its satisfaction in these days of celebrity culture. He savoured the wine. He would drink it to the lees.

Some lunchtimes it was quiet in the Casa Nostra, and this was one of them. Thursdays and Fridays were noisy and busy. But Mondays and Tuesdays business was slow. Henry liked it like that. Even the padrone seemed undisturbed by the lack of trade. Maybe the volume of business was not his prime concern. Only one other table was occupied, a couple of men talking quietly, no mobile phones. Henry read his newspaper. There were days when newspapers had their function, after all, and this was one of them. He worked away at the wine, savoured his spinach and ricotta balls in gorgonzola sauce. A modest lunch, just the primo. The waitress cruised past every now and then.

Eventually, out of a sort of politeness and from a fatal curiosity he asked, 'So where are you from?'

'Iraq,' she said.

'Ah,' said Henry. He reflected on the wisdom of saying any more. Another of those countries. It was bad enough having had all those translations into Serbian, as Pawley kept

reminding him. He had nearly been published in Iran, but then his translator's house had burned down. Iraq, though.

'And it's an interesting life story?'

'Oh, yes,' she said.

She gave him a knowing look.

'Married at fourteen. Pregnant at eighteen. Then my husband leaves me. I find out he is the biggest dealer in town. I cannot get on a plane because I am pregnant. What should I do?'

'Ah,' said Henry, nodding wisely. What indeed?

She started to explain how she had left the country, the travels, the adventures, but he couldn't follow it. Her English broke up as the story got more complex. Henry resorted to wiser and wiser nods until she went. But she was back before long, telling him stories of life under the Islamic revolution across the border.

'Khoumeni gave this speech in a cemetery when he first came. People here don't know this. He said, now petrol will be free, electricity will be free, rice will be free. And then after some years and petrol was still not free and electricity was not free and rice was not free, some people, they ask him, why did you say all those things would be free. And he said, I was talking to the dead.'

It was not a story Henry had heard. It excited him to hear unheard songs. The novelist as discoverer. The disseminator of the unknown. The educator of the world.

'The French put him in,' she said. 'They took the Shah back and put him in.'

He had heard that story. One of Pawley's global conspiracies. He nodded in wise agreement.

He sat there reflecting on past times. The Great Game. Sitting in the local bazaar, talking to the natives, picking up information. This was the life. That would show Pawley. He was not the only one who could trade conspiracy theories. He had his novelist's methods.

Pawley was concerned. Or expressed concern. He seized on Henry's story with relish as they sat in the Golden Bowl, sipping the house white, picking at the bread and olives.

'Looks like you've fallen into a classic honey trap.'

'Sounds good,' said Dr Bee.

'I knew you'd like it,' said Henry.

'I don't like it at all,' said Pawley. 'I think we might give the Casa Nostra a miss for a while.'

'Why?' Henry asked.

'Did she ever phone the Writers' Union?'

'Writer's Centre. I don't know.'

'Did you ask the Director?'

'Yes. She didn't know.'

'She would've if she had.'

'There are hundreds of calls.'

'But not from your Middle Eastern houri,' said Pawley. 'She wanted you, Henry, not some boring workshop.'

Henry smiled in smug self-satisfaction.

'So what's the problem?' he asked.

'In these times of terrorist scaremongering, they need terrorist scares. Every day they claim to expose some new plot, and they're all so shonky. Even you know that, Henry. They get some undercover type dressed up as an Arab and send him round to some young idealists whose phones they've been intercepting and he claims to be al-Quaeda, offers them a few explosives, and bang bang, another plot.'

'Why?' Henry asked.

'To justify war and increase repression.'

'And you feel we live in a repressive state?' Dr Bee asked.

'Certainly do.'

'Is that a yes?'

'Yes, that is a yes,' said Pawley.

'Personally,' said Dr Bee, 'I would much rather live in the United States than in Iraq or Iran.'

'Feel free,' said Pawley.

'I don't think I would feel at all free in the Middle East,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't feel free here.'

Dr Bee snorted.

'Naturally,' Pawley intoned, 'the common people don't want war, but, after all, it is the leaders of a country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or not. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism. It works the same in every country.'

Dr Bee snorted some more. 'Hermann Goering at Nuremberg.'

'And how does that relate to me and the waitress?' Henry asked, turning the conversation back to things of personal interest. And nothing was of more personal interest than his own well-being.

'You're perfect,' said Pawley. 'An old left-liberal with a weakness for sad stories told by nubile young victims. An expendable academic with a record.'

'What record?'

'It will all be on file somewhere,' said Pawley. 'They'll use her to lock you in, whisper sweet nothings about the human situation and American aggression in the Middle East, and they've got you. Strange money transfers to and from your bank account. Mysterious purchases of chemicals from agricultural suppliers and hairdressers recorded on your credit card. Early morning raid. Bundled down the front path with a blanket over your head. One more terrorist plot foiled.'

'And what happened to the husband?' Dr Bee asked.

'He immigrated here. That's how she got in. Family reunion. But she doesn't see him anymore,' said Henry.

'And that didn't make you wonder?' Pawley asked.

'Why should it?'

'The biggest drug dealer in town being welcomed into our commonwealth.'

'I hadn't thought about it,' said Henry. ‘Anyway, she didn’t actually say he was a drug dealer.’

‘So what was he, a car dealer?’ said Pawley derisively. ‘You’re letting your secret lust for *Hot Rod* and *Performance Car* distort your judgment.’

‘*Classic Car*,’ said Henry.

‘I prefer an arms dealer,’ said Dr Bee. ‘It would be interesting to see what he had to offer.’

‘Why didn’t you ask her?’ asked Pawley.

‘What, What sort of drugs? I should have asked her that? Cannabis? Heroin? Opium?’

‘I would’ve. I mean, really man, she might have had some amazing stuff.’

‘Nothing wrong with opium, as long as you've got a limitless supply of money,' Dr Bee assured them, spouting traditional wisdom. All your oriental needs supplied.

‘You didn’t wonder how if her husband was the biggest dealer in town, he came to immigrate here?’ Pawley asked.

‘Could have been a small town,’ said Henry. 'I guess the immigration department are as hopeless as everyone says. Keep out asylum seekers, let in drug dealers.'

'And that is your definition of hopelessness?'

'Seems pretty sloppy to me.'

'You hadn't considered that maybe it's policy? Drugs for arms. Oliver North and the Contras. The old CIA trail.'

'Not again,' Dr Bee groaned.

'It's worked before,' said Pawley. 'Why change it?'

'The Great Game,' said Henry in sentimental recollection. 'I must have been there in a past life.'

'What about this life, though, Henry?' Pawley asked. 'Where are you now? Who are the players and who is the ball?'

'The ball?'

'That round thing in the game they hit with their bats. Or kick with their booted feet. Much like a human head. Indeed, in origin it was a human head.'

'Whose head?'

'The sacrificial victim's, Henry. If I were you, I'd pull it in for a while. And anything else you might have thought of protruding.'

‘On the other hand, why not go for it?’ said Dr Bee. ‘As an intellectual terrorist you’ve always shown the career strategy of a suicide bomber.’

‘Intellectual?’ said Henry, aghast. ‘Literary, please.’

‘If it were only a matter of politely asking, we should all be Nobel laureates of literature,’ said Dr Bee. He had been sitting there for a while in scrupulous silence. Or unscrupulous silence. Whichever. But now he broke it.

'Sit there and suffer,' he said. 'Be defeatist. Meanwhile, for myself, I think I might ask the waitress to tell me her story. Invite her to share that sexuality of subversion, that titillating treachery and tantalizing terrorism so deftly evoked by Pawley here.'

Pawley shrugged. Henry focussed on the wine.

'I am not too staid, too stolid, to help her with her language. Record the episodes of her efflorescence and deflorescence. Suggest synonyms for the sensual, share a bottle of Shiraz and a haunch of goat, suck on a narghileh and burble ancient love songs into her ear, or indeed any other orifice. I could take her dainty hand and leading it across the page, not right to left as her custom has been, but left to right, more in keeping with the politics of our times, heh Pawley, and inscribe the reasons of the heart.'

'Oh, shut up,' Henry said.

'Put up or shut up,' Pawley agreed.

'A challenge!' said Dr Bee. 'I am prepared for it. I may not be a scribbling hack, or a petitioner of sedition, but I am nevertheless - '

'A dirty old man,' said Henry.

'Not so dirty,' said Dr Bee, inspecting his finger nails. 'Nor indeed so old. But I know flesh when I encounter it, its appeals, its rewards, its little frissons of delighted expectation.'

'Is that so?' said Henry.

'It is immaterial to me,' said Dr Bee, 'whether she is Savak or CIA, Mossad or MI6, neither terrorism nor subversion excites me or deters me. As long as she can declare in the immortal words of Helen Reddy "I am woman," that is sufficient.'

Henry could envision him, all smiles and lasciviousness, the waitress reaching a hand to her throat, in surprise, in satisfaction, that age old gesture of flattery noted and received and accepted. She too would be wreathed in smiles. And probably lasciviousness. She would lay her fingers delicately on Dr Bee's forearms, while his fingers fondly stroked the Kalashnikov. Henry held his head in his hands.

'I think we should visit the Casa Nostra next time,' Dr Bee said. 'How about tomorrow?'

'Not me,' said Pawley.

‘The self-sufficient addict, no other love but Mary Jane,’ said Dr Bee, sadly. ‘And as for Henry here, he is obsessed with an illusory posterity. He is more interested in delivering self-aggrandizing anecdotes of the literary life for young ladies to record with their tiny hands, rather than aggrandizing anything else by their fluttering touch.’

'I might pass,' said Henry. Shattered. No other word for it. He wasn't sure that he believed Pawley, but why take a risk in these terrible times?

'You'll just have to lunch alone,' said Pawley.

'I think not,' said Dr Bee. '*A deux*, I think. All going well.'

He ordered a dozen oysters by way of preparation.

23: Space Circle

'The sky's are so clear up there,' said Pawley, waxing lyrical about his country acreage, enthusiastic, entranced. When had he been so enthusiastic before? So entranced? It took him back, took years off his life, back to the days when the world was young and the sky was wide.

'So you sit out at night gazing at the stars?' said Dr Bee.

'Yes,' said Pawley. 'Sometimes I talk to the frogs.'

'You talk to the frogs?'

'Yes. They croak and I respond. Croak. Then they go croak croak. And I respond croak croak. Then they go croak croak croak. And I -'

'We've got the general drift of it,' said Dr Bee.

'It's great fun.'

'You swap jokes? You know the language of the frogs?'

'Sure do.'

'You read the signs of the stars?'

'You bet.'

'Gazing ever upwards?'

'Amazing what you see,' said Pawley. 'Stars. Shooting stars. Surveillance satellites. Aircraft.'

'UFOs?' asked Dr Bee.

'Not so much anymore.'

'Not so much anymore. You mean they used to be more frequent?'

'Oh yes,' said Pawley. 'They used to be a lot more frequent.'

It was back in the days when the world was young and the sky was wide. Madeleine phoned.

'I have to talk to you,' she said.

'Go ahead,' said Pawley.

'No, I mean talk to you,' she said. 'Not over the phone.'

'Oh, it's like that, is it ?' he said.

'No, it's not like anything,' she said.

'Oh,' said Pawley, 'what on earth is it like?'

'It's like nothing on earth,' she said.

'Sounds familiar,' he said.

He walked round to her place. This was his exercise. The restoration of health. You could either see things as time-consuming or healthy. It would have been quicker to drive. But less healthy. And besides by seven-thirty at night worrying about time was a worry without solution. Most of the day had already been wasted. Why worry about a ten minute walk? After a few minutes he stopped worrying and got into the rhythm of it. Health. Magnolia trees in splendid bloom.

Glimpses of the harbour. Moored freighters. The flickering lights of television through open doors. Frying onions.

'Let's go for a walk,' she said.

More exercise.

'I don't want to talk about it in the house.'

More mystery.

'You mustn't tell anybody,' she said. 'Just know that whatever happens, I'll be all right.'

They walked down to the water, past the disused dry dock, down to the old ferry wharf jutting out into the harbour.

'I'm going in a flying saucer,' she said.

He hadn't expected it. He'd been tossing up themes in his head as he walked, turning up this, repressing that, there were so many things that they might have had to talk about. But he hadn't thought of flying saucers.

'When?' he asked.

Again, there were so many possible questions, jostling to be uttered. This seemed as urgent as any.

'Thursday,' she said. 'At least that's when we've got to be ready. They have a different sense of time from us.'

'Who's we?' he asked.

'The circle.'

'How long are you going for?' he asked.

'Not for long.'

'What's long?'

'I don't really know,' she said.

'I'd find that out first,' said Pawley.

'I'll ask,' she said. 'That's what's difficult, leaving you and little one. That's the hardest part.'

The harbour was still, smooth, dark. The water lapped at the posts of the jetty, gentle reachings up the timber, the late residual traces of the wash of a vanished vessel.

'I really don't want to leave you,' she said.

'But it's an offer you can't refuse.'

'It'll be amazing,' she said.

They'd been preparing for this for months. The space circle. It was a select group from the psychic circle. Just a handful of them with special powers. Well, everybody has these powers but not everyone has developed them. So they'd had this other group. Part of the time they practiced telepathy. Then they got in touch with the space people.

'You got in touch with them, or they got in touch with you?'

'I don't know how it happened. It just happened. I guess when we were ready for it they got in touch.'

'They made the move?'

'They're more advanced than we are.'

'Or had Irene been keeping them on hold?'

'She might have been. I don't know.'

'There's an awful lot you don't seem to know.'

'They're not the important things,' said Madeleine.

'And what are the important things?'

'The spiritual things.'

'Oh,' he said.

'I know it must sound crazy,' she said.

'Yes,' he said.

They looked up at the sky, stars pulsating in the sea of space.

They would sit round the room and say a prayer. The cat out. The cat didn't enjoy the goings on and became restive and howled if they didn't put him out. Then they said prayers. They said prayers to drive off the negative forces. The black things. Sometimes the black things were resistant. Generally they didn't want to go and sometimes they put up quite a struggle. Irene would speak to them and they would speak back through one of the circle. Sometimes they sang.

'What a nice tune,' said Irene. 'You must have been in the army, I can almost hear the fife and drum.'

'Napoleon's army,' the voice said.

'Off you go,' said Irene, 'you've left your earthly body now, off you go to the realms of light, I can see them waiting for you, calling out to you to join them.'

'Is he there?'

'Is who there, dear?'

'Napoleon, I don't want to see that bugger again.'

Sometimes it would be horrific. Howls and groans and imprecations. On and on. If all else failed Irene would threaten it with being bound and chained and cast into the bottomless pit by the

angels of light. These were more like demonic forces than disincarnate entities, come not to be sent on into the realms of light but to try and disrupt and delay the proceedings.

After they'd sent on all the lost souls and dealt with any demonic forces, then they would let the guides through. The guides wouldn't come through unless it was a clear atmosphere. If it wasn't a clear atmosphere but only seemed that way, some of the black things could purport to be guides and really send you adrift. So it was important to get it right.

Irene would go round the circle again, giving everyone's guide their chance to speak. It could take a long time. Some seemed to be inhibited or to have difficulty in finding the wavelength of speech.

'Your guide will come to you. Just be patient. Say some more prayers.'

How do I know if it's a guide, Pawley wondered. How do I know I'm not just imagining it? Or just making it up? What happens if nothing comes? How long can you sit in the circle without a guide coming through? There was no pressure and yet there was a pressure, it was like the old gymnasium days at school, how many times could you baulk at the wooden horse? For him, every time. He'd never managed it. Or the ropes. What if you fell and broke your neck? You'd become a disincarnate entity wandering around looking for a spiritualist group to send you on.

His guide came.

Oh, was that his guide, how amazing, that familiar figure he would never have thought of but now, before him, seemed so right.

'Do you see your guide yet?' asked Irene.

He squeezed out a reply. 'Yes.'

'Does your guide want to speak to us?'

The guide said nothing, hanging there, manifest, silent.

How long could you sustain these silences? After a while did you have to concede nothing was being said? Was this when people started to fake it, and to say something because of the unspoken pressure of the group to have an interesting guide? Just to have a vocal guide?

'Does he have a few words for us?'

More silence.

'Sometimes it takes a while,' said Irene. 'Especially to begin with.'

Words detached themselves from the word-horde and slowly connected themselves into a simple sentence. He didn't know if they were his words or the guide's words. He was certainly in accord with them, so they might just have been his own. Or perhaps his wise words had always been his guide's words. All these years.

'Does he want to speak or shall we move on?'

It was his last chance.

The words croaked out, his lips moved with great effort, as if numbed beneath a great silencing pressure.

'It would not be appropriate.'

'Very good,' said Irene. 'I understand.'

She moved on to Carmen. Carmen's guide was a space creature and when it spoke through her she bent over and her arms hung down and the idiom was quite alien, a sing-song vaguely oriental delivery, clearly English as a second language.

'I got into it because I got sick. And Irene was the only person who helped me. I tried everything.'

'Chiropractors, homoeopaths, naturopaths, osteopaths, herbalists, acupuncturists, aroma-therapists, colour therapists, allergists, nutritionists. . . .'

'I was sick.'

'A litany of modern life.'

'You make it sound like I was doing it for fun.'

'But it was enjoyable.'

'I was sick.'

'But it was interesting.'

'That's how you learn about these things. By being sick. It's only when you get sick you see how to get well.'

'Whatever you do you certainly do it to the full,' he said.

He was amazed at her stamina, at the continual optimistic energy and enthusiasm.

'Tomorrow the world, Thursday the galaxies.'

'You think I'm mad,' Madeleine said.

'As you said yourself, once you've taken acid the world never seems quite sane again.'

'I'm glad I took it,' she said. 'Except it does terrible things to your etheric web. It burns holes in it and it's there to keep out all sorts of elemental forces and once you wreck it. . . .'

'Sounds like the ozone layer.'

'It's exactly like the ozone layer.'

'Ah, microcosm-macrocosm,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'You may well mock but one day you're going to wake up and find out it's all true.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' he heard himself saying.

'You'll see,' she said. Ominously. She could be very ominous. He found it spine-chilling. Just being told 'you'll see' was chilling enough, without any added ominousness.

'You'll look after little one while I'm away?'

'Of course I will,' Pawley said. 'How long are you planning to be away for?'

She didn't answer.

'Are you coming back?'

She looked at him, eyes radiant for a vision of outer space.

'You don't know, do you?'

'The hardest thing is leaving you and little one behind.'

'So what if we never see you again?'

'I shall come back,' she said.

Was that a tone of resignation, or regret?

'What do I say to the school?'

'You don't have to say anything. I'm not supposed to tell anyone but I had to tell you.'

'I'm glad you did,' he said.

'You're not mad?' she said.

'Me mad?'

'Mad at me?'

'No, I'm not mad at you. I'm maybe just a trifle sceptical.'

'You don't believe me.'

'I believe you,' he said. 'I'm not so sure I believe Irene. Who are these critters anyway? How do you know they're what you think they are? I'd want to know a lot more before I went off

with them.'

The water lapped at the post of the wharf, the stars pulsated in the sea of space.

'They could be anybody. They could be the United States Air Force for all you know. What about all those meditations about Ayer's Rock? It's like Josh trying to enter Pine Gap through meditation and finding himself up against psychic jamming.'

'We didn't do anything like that,' she said.

'How do you know they're space creatures? Have you ever seen them?'

'They communicate by telepathy.'

'But you've never seen them. It could be a military experiment. They could just be claiming they're from a UFO.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Research into telepathy. It's the one thing you never read any reports on. LSD, electronic bugging, satellite surveillance, that's all been written about. But there's almost nothing about psychic stuff. Which suggests that's the thing they're working on.'

'Because there's no evidence?'

'Exactly.'

'Convenient,' she said. 'Anyway, why would they use somebody like Irene?'

'Who else would you use? If you're going to do psychic experiments, you need experienced psychics.'

'I suppose.'

'What happens to all those tapes she makes?'

'They never come out.'

'But she always makes them?'

'Yes.'

'So who listens to them? Have you ever listened to them?'

'No, the only time she tried to play one, nothing came out. The spirit guides didn't record.'

'So why does she keep on taping them if they don't record?'

'I don't know. Why?'

'Maybe they collect the tapes each week and courier them to some research centre.'

'Stop it,' she said, 'you're freaking me out.'

'I'm freaking you out?' he said. 'Announcing you were about to leave in a flying saucer wasn't exactly restful news.'

She laid a hand on his arm.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'I just wonder,' he said. 'That's all.'

'I think you should meditate on it,' Pawley said.

'On what?'

'On whether you want to go off in this flying saucer.'

'Oh, but I do.'

'Well, on whether it's a good idea. Just in case.'

He said it tentatively but she still wasn't thrilled.

'Though of course,' he added, 'you can't be sure who you'll get when you meditate. It might just be them waiting to confirm.'

'Jung wrote about them,' Madeleine said.

'That doesn't mean they're for real,' said Pawley. 'Somebody could have applied what

Jung wrote. So when you say they fit into a vision of the collective unconscious or they're archetypal, of course they do, because the so-called evidence that is presented is designed to confirm that.'

'Why would anyone want to do that?'

'A vast mind-control experiment.'

'For what?'

'For social control. That's why there are all those Hollywood movies about aliens. It's all part of the consciousness industry.'

'For what?'

'How would I know? Something evil, no doubt.'

'It could be something beautiful,' said Madeleine.

Pawley found that hard to believe.

'It would be terrible to get aboard and find it was crewed by the United States Air Force,' he said. 'Let alone the Royal Australian Air Force. That would be a letdown.'

Why was it given to him to deny all the fun? Yes, there is a Santa Claus but he's an amanita muscaria mushroom. You eat the mushroom and the reindeers drink your piss and then you and they are away over the chimney tops. Maybe that was fun in its own way. But not the air force.

'Or Air America,' he added. 'It's probably a CIA operation.'

'You say that about everything,' Madeleine said.

'It's usually true, too,' he said.

Years later it emerged that the US military had spent some $26 million on research into psychic spying back then. When the world was young and the sky was wide. And dollars were

worth more. And that was only what they admitted. And only the military. Predictive Remote Viewing, it was called.

In the end they didn't go. One of the group backed out and Madeleine started to ask for answers that could not be given.

'I don't think we're quite ready yet,' said Irene's guide.

'Or said Irene,' said Pawley. 'How do you know when it's her and when it's her guide?'

'You can tell.'

'What if she faked it?'

'Why would she fake it?'

'Because it's all one vast conspiracy,' said Pawley.

'I don't think,' said Madeleine, 'that seeing it all as one vast conspiracy is any more sane or likely than believing it's all true.'

Pawley pondered.

'You want a third explanation ? A middle way ?'

'I don't want any explanation,' Madeleine said.

'Well that's easily satisfied,' said Pawley.

She wasn't really satisfied, but she accepted it.

'It's the spiritual work that's the important part, anyway,' she said.

But some cloudless nights they would sit out on the veranda and she would look up at the stars stretching across the sky.

'It would have been amazing,' she would say.

24: Control

‘The only reason for governmental funding of the arts is control,’ Pawley said.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Henry demurred.

‘Well shut up then and I’ll tell you,’ Pawley said. ‘There may be a minority who enjoy sucking off the surplus for an evening’s diversion. Directors of armaments corporations, manufacturers of poison gas and land mines, senior executives of media organizations and other disseminators of weapons of mass distraction who like to take their wives and mistresses and boy-friends to the massively subsidized opera where they can meet other criminals and politicians instead of having to play golf. Or hedge fund managers who like to get the huge tax benefits the government offers for investing in movies. Corporate welfare, while the old and indigent and sick and insane are left to die in the street.’

‘I noticed the gutters were piled high with them as I drove here,’ said Dr Bee.

‘But the major reason is control,’ Pawley continued imperturbably. ‘All those writers sucking on the government teat –‘

‘You sound like Killer Kilkenny now,’ said Henry.

‘- writers who can be relied upon to drain all ideas of significance, to dissolve crucial issues in the acid of trivia and irrelevance. To indulge their fetishes and display them as liberation, to deflect attention from the meaningful and promote the silly.’

Henry sighed. In recognition, in agreement.

‘They are like the leaders of the western Labour parties, hired to betray what they ostensibly represent.’

‘And what might that be?’ Dr Bee asked.

‘In the case of Labour politicians, socialism. In the case of writers, literary value.’

‘You have no difficulties in defining literary value? Dr Bee asked.

‘None at all.’

‘It consists, I assume, in condemning capitalism, ridiculing the ruling class, and concocting conspiratorial analyses that conclude that the terrorist threat is an illusion perpetuated by the security services in order to keep the people low and ignorant.’

‘Very good,’ said Pawley. ‘You’re learning. That is the content analysis. Literary value involves, as well as that, verbal skill and subtlety, a saturation in the literary heritage, and an ear for the language of men and women today. Qualities not recognized, indeed despised, by the apparatchiks of state control. The current principle is to offer financial rewards and secure status to writers and artists who are willing, indeed eager, to turn a blind eye to the mechanisms of repression and to celebrate irrelevance, trivia and mystification.’

‘Preferably badly written,’ Henry glossed.

‘Absolutely,’ said Pawley.

‘And you alone can see this,’ said Dr Bee.

‘Many of us see it,’ said Pawley. ‘But given the repressive apparatus of the capitalist media and the complacent complicity of the governmentally funded and rewarded so-called intelligentsia, it remains unexpressed and inexpressible.’

‘Doesn’t seem to stop you,’ Dr Bee sighed.

‘But could I get this into print? On radio or television?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Henry. ‘Have you tried?’

Pawley laughed. Hollowly. His practiced hollow laugh.

‘You could create your own blogs,’ Henry suggested.

‘The internet is no more free than any other medium. How could it be? The CIA and FBI are regular contributors to Wikipedia. The Australian government has a whole media section in the Department of Defence designed to pump out its lies onto the web. The ostensibly radical sites are just there to entrap the unwary who hit upon them, get their names recorded. Dissent is a fraud. It’s all in Orwell.’

‘I seem to remember your arguing that Orwell was an anti-leftist agent of imperialism. An Etonian super-spy dobbing in left-wing writers to the security agencies and broadcasting propaganda to keep India in imperial servitude,’ Dr Bee recalled.

‘Indeed,’ said Pawley. ‘Which is how he knew so much. *1984* was based on inside information. He knew the future was one of continual war, of control and surveillance, of history endlessly rewritable, as it has now become in this digitalized age, of underground opposition groups that are the creation of the secret services in order to control and monitor dissent, of socialist parties committed to betraying their principles and acting as the facilitating agents of late industrial capitalism.’

‘I am surprised that there is any need for controlling writers in this world of total control you project,’ said Dr Bee.

‘It is surprising, I agree,’ Pawley conceded. ‘But there it is. Arts funding is a bait. You want rewards, Henry, you want international publication, global translation, endless movie adaptations, accolades and prizes and fellowships and grants, you know what to do.’

‘There is such a thing as individual integrity,’ said Henry, standing out there on the high moral ground, like stout Cortez on a peak in Darien, as the ice caps melted and the seas inexorably rose.

‘Useless,’ said Pawley. ‘Once government subsidies are in place, no one can compete. There is no possibility of an alternative remaining any more. Money is poured in to publish and support the safe and complicit. How can you undercut it? The days of private patronage are over. The inherited power bases of the past have been destroyed by death duties and inheritance taxes. The only structures left are avaricious global capitalism and its client politicians.’

‘You could convert to Islam,’ Dr Bee suggested to Henry.

‘One reactionary system pitted against another,’ Pawley assured them. ‘The backward looking reaction of Islam or the forward looking reaction of capitalism.’

‘I thought you believed capitalism offered no future.’

‘Precisely,’ said Pawley.’

‘Might as well give up, Henry,’ said Dr Bee. ‘Go home and read a good book from the past before they’re all withdrawn from circulation. No point trying to write anything for the future.’

‘Has it ever struck you,’ Henry asked Pawley, less a question than an assertion in the face of Pawley’s endless grand narratives, ‘has it ever struck you that you are as controlled as any of us, as much a victim of the all embracing conspiracies you espouse as any poor deluded mystified mere mortal. Controlled by your insatiable need to find more unquestioned evidence of total surveillance, absolute power and fear of freedom. Demonstrating, indeed, an utter dependence on the fantastic visions that you project. Bound by your own paranoia. An eager prisoner of the fantasies that you conjure up.’

‘Of course,’ said Pawley, smiling, with evident satisfaction. ‘But in recognizing our lack of freedom, we make a step towards achieving it.’

‘Achieving which?’ Henry asked. ‘Freedom or the lack of it?’

‘The choice is yours,’ Pawley assured him.

25: The Heart-Attack Machine

Pawley did his usual eleven hour drive up the coast. The great escape. It was hot. He looked at himself in the rear-view mirror and didn’t like what he saw. It wasn’t just that turning red was way out of political fashion. And being out of political fashion was something best not declared. But being that red didn’t look like how he preferred to look. It didn’t look healthy. Nor at all appealing. Not a matter of self-loathing. It just didn’t look cool. Over-heating, maybe. But having the air-conditioning on chilled his lungs, breathing all that cold air made him cough. He tried drinking bottled water but it was not something he enjoyed. And the bottled water was getting over-heated too.

So, a pot of tea, a couple or so joints, and a bottle of cheap red wine were his first concerns on arriving. Open up the windows. Let in some air. Sit outside on the deck and keep the mosquitoes at bay with the dope smoke. Fend off Ross River and Barma Forest and Dengue fevers with the herb. More organic than poisoning your skin with insect repellent.

He was too stuffed to venture out again to eat. Made himself an omelette with the tomatoes he’d bought at a roadside stall and the eggs and cheese he’d got at the local shop. Ate a few chocolate biscuits he’d got at the shop, too. Quite a few, smoking grass always had that effect. The local shop catered for the pandemic regional munchies. The Valley of the Weed.

It all gave him terrible indigestion pains in the middle of the night. The drive never helped, sitting there hour after hour, and the tension collecting in the stomach.

In the morning he drank a pot of tea and smoked a couple of joints and didn't feel much like eating. He gathered up a few fallen fronds of leaves from the deck and bending over made him feel quite ill. He walked down to dump the fronds on his bonfire pile, and found climbing back up the slope to the house hard work. His teeth ached along the lower jaw. He felt quite ill indeed, drained of energy. He sat on the canvas chair on the deck for a while and then went inside and lay on the bed and after a while crawled beneath the sheets and spent the day there. He didn't feel much good the next day, drank a bit of tea, didn't eat much, phoned up his acupuncturist and booked in for a couple of days ahead. Acupuncture usually helped with his stomach symptoms. Liver stress, they all said, all the booze and dope and stress. Getting stressed at the news, arguing with the television, getting pissed off with the newspapers. He'd tried cutting out chocolate and coffee and orange juice to ease the stress on the liver. No way he could lay off the booze and dope.

Apart from which he suspected he was being poisoned. He suspected it seriously enough not to tell anyone about it. He suspected all the old dissidents were being poisoned. They all looked terrible. He tried these days to keep out of their company, but whenever he saw any of them they all looked sick. Ravaged. Unable to focus. Unable to complete. The great analyses of the iniquities of capital never delivered. Marginalized. Self-consumed with frustration and suspicion and mistrust. An entire generation lacking advancement. Blocked and thwarted and neutralized by the agents of the secret state. There were well-documented suspicions from the sixties and seventies. Psychotropic substances, mind altering experiments, black magic, chemical sprays, all the dirty tricks that had been experimented on in the cold war years and developed

over time and now brought to fruition. LSD, shellfish toxin, polonium 210. And why wouldn't they? This was the age of chemicals. Chemical and biological warfare in the war zones. And back at home they kept all the lunatics chemically tranquilized, now they had closed down the mental hospitals and turned them into Writers' Centres. Why not control dissidents the same way? Anyway, that was what he suspected. Smoke enough dope and you start to see the picture.

But right now he didn't feel like a smoke. Nor a drink. That was how bad he felt. No specific pain. No obvious symptoms of anything he could think of. Just feeling no good. Fragile. Weak.

'I think you should see a doctor,' his acupuncturist said, feeling his pulses, such as there were.

He still felt terrible. Worse than usual after whatever it was he all too often felt terrible after: liver, gall-bladder, digestion. An ill-defined terribleness. No pains. Just a weakness, a weariness.

'Yes?' he said.

'Yes,' she said.

'What, when I get back to Sydney in a couple of weeks?'

'Before then,' she said.

'Like this week?'

'Today,' she said.

'Today?'

'I think you might have had a small heart attack.'

'Really?'

'Possibly,' she said.

‘Cor,’ he said.

In the archives of archaic demotic exclamation, cor blimey seemed more appropriate for the occasion than something like triperoo.

He didn’t know if he could get in to see a doctor to-day.

But he did.

‘And what can I do for you?’ the doctor asked.

‘Maybe you could assure me I haven’t had a heart attack.’

‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘that’s an interesting request.’

And he didn’t. Assure him that he hadn’t, that is. Quite the opposite. He gave him an ECG, called in a colleague, conferred in whispers which was alarming in itself, phoned up a specialist at the hospital to check on the results, and sent him up there in an ambulance. Wouldn’t even let him drive.

‘Chances are you’ll have a second one and kill someone else on the road,’ he said.

It wasn’t at all what Pawley had expected.

The doctor had not seemed persuaded by Pawley’s conspiracy theories. Nor the specialist.

‘Well, that’s as may be,’ the specialist said, ‘but the evidence of the x-rays and the blood tests is pretty persuasive for a heart-attack.’

Pawley took it all in good part. The world in general seemed unprepared for his revelations. Maybe after all what he’d been ascribing to liver attacks had been heart attacks. Preliminary ones. Responses to little prods from the heart-attack machine.

‘Just a small one,’ he conceded.

‘Not that small,’ said the doctor.

But he wasn’t especially worried. A strange calm seemed to have taken him over. Maybe it was the apomorphines. He accepted being in hospital under observation. Just an extension of the surveillance society. And it was an excellent hospital. Room to himself. A view of the airport, aircraft landing and taking off. He always enjoyed watching aircraft. Like being a child again, sick in bed.

Except that they wanted to have a closer look. An angiogram. They couldn’t do that straight away, which suited him.

‘One in a thousand chance of death,’ the specialist said. ‘I’ve done a thousand. No one’s died yet.’

Pawley did not feel reassured. If the specialist had said he’d done five hundred he would have felt happier. Even seven hundred and fifty. But now he’d reached his thousand, hadn’t he reached the safety limit, shouldn’t he give up now?

Pawley always remembered the aeronautical engineer who’d sat next to him on a flight and assured him that saying aircraft were ninety-five per cent safe meant that they were five per cent unsafe. That five in a hundred went down. Had to. That was statistics. Not one of his cheerier flights.

Anyway, maybe he wouldn’t need to have the angiogram. After a day or two of observation they would realize he was fine again and he’d be able to go.

‘Do you smoke?’ the specialist asked.

‘Only dope,’ said Pawley. ‘Marijuana,’ he added, just in case he thought he meant heavy stuff. But not tobacco. Not for years. Of course when there was a drought and he could only get

hash he'd had to use tobacco, crumbling the hash into it. But he preferred the fresh taste of leaf without the sourness of tobacco.

'The toxins in the smoke inflame the arteries,' the specialist said.

So after all that fuss about tobacco being bad for you, now it seemed it wasn't especially the tobacco, it was just smoking. Pawley was incensed. All the tax-payer funded propaganda about marijuana driving you mad, impairing your performance, turning people into sex freaks, zombies, schizophrenics. Reefer madness. And the one thing they didn't ever tell you was about smoking inflaming the arteries.

The answer was clearly to eat it. Hash cookies. That was the sort of medical advice the health authorities should have been issuing.

'But don't you just love that first joint of the morning?' said one of the nurses.

A cup of tea, a couple of puffs, the early morning light, the awakening day, the gradual sense of well-being as the shades of night recoiled. Bliss was it in that dawn.

'A window of opportunity has appeared,' said the specialist.

They could do the angiogram that afternoon.

A decision had to be made. To go ahead or not. There didn't seem to be a lot of choice.

Pawley was not at all sure he wanted to remember the details.

'So no open heart surgery?' said Dr. Bee.

'No.'

'Just a puncture into an artery in the groin and then a probe up to the heart.'

Pawley felt sick at the very idea.

'Something like that,' he conceded.

Down in the depths of the hospital basement, down in the concrete and lead, the place throbbing with radiation, warning signs everywhere in case you couldn't feel it, the specialist and his team discussing real estate prices as they waited. All a gamble, really.

They told him he could watch it on the the screen.

Live transmission.

The idea appalled him. He didn't want to know. There was so much he didn't want to know.

They found one artery totally blocked. As suspected. Already creating new little capillaries for a new blood flow.

Couldn't they just let it take its course?

But they brought in the interventionist cardiologist. He wore some sort of head-dress. Something surgeons and the PLO wore. Spattered in blood. Seemed like it anyway. He was recently back from further specialist training in the USA. Washington. Lots of varieties of knife crime there, every sort of heart injury. Like war-zones for brain-surgeons interested in gun-shot wounds, a good place to develop your skills.

'Same risk,' said the interventionist cardiologist. 'One in five hundred chance of a stroke, one in a thousand of death.'

What could he say, already wired up to it all, but 'Go ahead.'

The put in a couple of stents. Prop open the arteries.

'How long do they last?' he asked.

'They'll outlast you.'

He wasn't sure it was quite the sort of answer he wanted. Not phrased quite like that.

And then down in the recovery ward with twenty minutes of pressure applied to the hole they'd made so he didn't bleed to death.

'It must have been stressful,' said Henry, summoning up the expected sympathy.

'It wasn't, oddly enough,' said Pawley. 'I felt quite relaxed. What I was most worried about was the mouse.'

'Mice in the hospital?' said Henry.

'No, in the house, down the coast. I'd been catching them.'

'Why don't you just put down baits?' Dr Bee suggested. 'Save a lot of trouble. Use some of Henry's warfarin.'

'The idea is to catch them humanely and set them free,' said Pawley.

'So why were you worried?'

'Because I'd set a trap in the night before and there was nothing in it in the morning, and I was afraid one might have got caught the night they put me in hospital.'

'So you added to your stress by worrying?'

'I phoned the banana farmer next door and asked him to release it.'

'I bet he was pleased,' said Dr Bee.

'I'd left a window open so he was able to break in. He said it looked pretty sick and sorry for itself.'

'Much like you,' said Dr Bee.

'No, I was feeling fine, I told you.'

'Denial,' said Henry.

'Displacement,' said Dr Bee.

‘Could be,’ said Pawley. ‘Anyway, if it was, that was good. Stopped me worrying about myself.’

‘Maybe if you’d worried about yourself earlier you wouldn’t have had a heart attack,’ said Henry.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Healthier life style. Exercise. Fat free, stress free, you know. . . .’

‘I do lead a healthy life,’ said Pawley. ‘It doesn’t seem fair. I don’t eat meat. No animal fat. I kept pretty well to the Mediterranean diet they recommend.’

‘I don’t think they recommended the bottle of wine a day.’

‘The French do,’ said Pawley. ‘It’s part of the diet. Antioxidants. A couple of glasses, anyway. Even the specialist agreed on that. One of them, anyway. The French are quite definite about a bottle a day.'

‘It’s probably all the stress,’ said Henry.

‘The university,’ agreed Dr. Bee.

‘Marriage,’ said Henry.

‘Anxiety about running out of dope,’ said Dr. Bee.

‘It’s the toxins in the smoke,’ said Pawley, ‘they should have told us about that. I think it was a deliberate conspiracy to suppress that.’

‘Kill off all the old pot-heads.’

‘Why not?’

‘Why not?’ Dr Bee agreed. ‘Not a bad idea at all.’

‘All that government propaganda about tobacco causing cancer. So of course you’d figure, well grass isn’t tobacco, it isn’t full of chemical additives like commercially grown

tobacco, so no problem there. All organic. And all the time there was a problem. And no one ever told us.'

'You've been reading the wrong packets,' said Henry. 'Cigarettes carry a warning about heart disease.'

'But not dope.'

'I don't believe dope comes in a packet,' said Dr Bee.

'No, in plastic bags,' said Pawley. 'There you are, you see.'

'See what?' asked Dr Bee.

'Governmental failure. They never found a way to tell us. I think it's scandalous. I'm thinking of starting a class-action against the Department of Health. Not that it would do any good. It was probably deliberate.'

He could feel his heart rate accelerating. Full recovery. Or imminent cardiac arrest.

'A conspiracy. To kill off all the dope-smokers. The last of the alternative.'

'I thought you used to say they promoted dope smoking to get people too stoned for political action.'

'No reason not to kill them off at the same time,' said Pawley. 'From their point of view, that is.'

'And you feel a class-action might flush out this conspiracy.'

'Sort of thing you need a joint to ponder over,' said Pawley. 'Just a couple of tokes and I'd be able to tell you. You don't happen to have any on you?'

'No.'

'No,' said Henry.

'Pity.'

‘You’re not still proposing to smoke after that?’

‘After what?’

‘Your heart attack.’

‘Oh, that,’ said Pawley. ‘That was just a warning.’

26: After Dinner Speech

'I just had a call from the Writers' Festival,' said the Director from behind an array of freshly cut bottle-brush blooms in her Writers’ Centre office.

'There are too many writers' festivals,' Henry declared.

'Is that so?' said the Director.

'One in every city, every region, every remote community, everywhere.'

'I remember when Tuscan Bayes said there were too many books published. You were outraged. Censorship, you said. Repression. Let a thousand flowers bloom.'

The bottle-brushes bristled with delight. Henry sneezed.

'Yes, well, that was a long time ago.'

'Things are different now?'

'There are a lot more books.'

'You're in favour of a cull?' she asked. Hopefully. Thinking of the Centre’s library again. Its untidiness.

'There's already been a cull of independent publishers.'

'Not a bad thing I would imagine, given your opinion of publishers.'

'No,' said Henry, 'a very bad thing. Far less choice.'

'You said there were a lot more books now.'

'Every year there are more books. But what sort of books?'

'You tell me, Henry.'

'Less variety, more of the same. Less literary fiction.'

'I thought you said most literary fiction is terrible.'

'What gets published as literary fiction, yes. But what about what gets rejected?'

'They've been rejecting you, have they, Henry?'

'No,' he said firmly.

'But they might. In the future.'

Henry reflected.

'Everything's possible,' he agreed.

'So what have you got against writers' festivals?'

'They're part of the problem,' said Henry. 'Full of people who don't buy books. Devoid of real writers.'

'The way of the future,' said the Director.

'No interest in literature or art. Just food writers and celebrities and politicians' wives who haven't even read the book published under their name.'

'Partners we call them now,' said the Director.

'Who?'

'We don't call them wives.'

'Clogs, then,' said Henry.

'Clogs,' said the Director, stunned, appalled in this age of no smoking and careful speech.

'It's Miltonic,' said Henry.

'That's no excuse.'

'No,' Henry agreed. 'Probably an indictable offence to quote from the literary tradition.'

'No wonder you don't get invited,' she said.

'Not invited where?'

'Festivals.'

'I do. Sometimes.'

'But you still complain about them.'

'Some things need to be said,' said Henry.

'Write about them, Henry. Write me a piece for the magazine.'

'If I were to,' he said, 'then in future ages my work would need scholarly annotation to indicate what these festivals were that I was writing about. A momentary, evanescent fad.'

'But your works won't be evanescent.'

'I sincerely hope not,' he said.

'I notice the silent assumption that they will be reissued aeons ahead in scholarly editions.'

Henry smiled, graciously.

'True writers,' he announced, 'are private people.'

'That's what Tuscan Bayes and Francesca Templar say every time they give an interview.'

'True writers,' said Henry. 'Not opportunists like them.'

'They're on every festival program,' said the Director.

'Preserving their privacy,' said Henry. He laughed, hollowly. He had been practicing Pawley’s hollow laughs. 'The point about being a writer,' he announced, sententiously, 'is

writing. Writing, not holding forth in public. Not pontificating. A writer belongs behind a typewriter. It serves as a barrier against the world.'

'A typewriter?' said the Director. 'What's that?'

'Well, a personal computer.'

'What about a pen? Or a propelling pencil like old Blokey O'Kee.'

Henry thought.

'It's not that the typewriter -'

'Computer.'

'- was actually a physical barrier. Though some of those big old manual ones might have stopped a bullet. But they symbolized that necessary separation from the world.'

'Really?' said the Director. 'You feel the public is out to kill you? They want crime and romance and you foist literary fiction on them.'

'No, not at all.'

'But you fear the public.'

'Writers are shy,' said Henry.

'Really?'

'Withdrawing. Modest. Sensitive.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes.'

'Any advance on sensitive?'

She handed him the *Dictionary of Synonyms*.

'Having to communicate with crowds is exactly what the literary personality doesn't want to do.'

'Dickens. Mark Twain. Oscar Wilde,' the Director suggested.

'Performance personalities love it. But the writer -'

'Is a shrinking violet.'

'Well, not exactly shrinking,' said Henry, stretching himself in his chair. Had to watch your posture, these days. Didn't do to slump over like a shrivelled, dithering old man. Nothing more guaranteed to outrage the Director than any signs of being a dithering old man.

'Writers' festivals are a contradiction, really. Reading and writing are solitary activities. Conducted in the privacy of your own home.'

'For private people.'

'For people who don't like festivals. Or crowds.'

'Or people.'

'Or people.'

'But you still go to them. When invited.'

'You have to,' he said. 'They've become part of the business. Integrated into publicity and marketing. In the past -'

'The good old days.'

'I don't know about that,' he said. 'But you'd get an interview in the press once in a while. You didn’t even have to have a new book out. Now you only get an interview if you're appearing at a festival. Or if you're the director of a festival, of course. Even more likely then. Professional administrators promoting themselves.'

'Fair enough,' said the Director.

'No it isn’t. They know nothing about literature. Same as the university. Everything's run by administrators who have no idea what it's all about. The book trade, yes, they know how to be

part of the promotional racket of global conglomerates. But they neither know nor care about writing. Which is why festivals are so dangerous. Along with the universities they're committed to the destruction of literary value.'

'Is that so?' said the Director.

'Yes, that's so, as you very well know,' said Henry. 'The festival is the news now. The festival has its publicists getting media space. If you're lucky they might arrange an interview for you in order to promote the festival, and that's your only chance to promote yourself and your book.'

'I thought you said the people who go to festivals don't buy books.'

'They don't. But hopefully people who read the interview in the papers do.'

'So you go to festivals.'

'Have to. Only way to get an interview these days. And far more people read the papers than go to festivals.'

'I seem to remember you saying no one reads newspapers anymore.'

'That's true, too,' he agreed. 'Circulations are declining.'

'So all is gloom.'

'Pretty much,' he agreed.

'Well, Henry,' the Director beamed, 'I have a nice surprise for you.'

'What sort of surprise?' Henry asked warily.

'An invitation.'

'To what?'

'A writers' festival. To address a festival dinner. Isn't that nice?'

'I'm not sure. Depends on who I'm sitting next to.'

'I'll book a table,' she said. 'Just for the Centre. You'll be in safe hands.'

He wondered.

He should have trusted his doubts.

'Of course, you could refuse,' she said.

'Not really.'

'Why not?'

'Then they stop inviting you.'

'I thought you didn't want to be invited. Couldn't you say you're a recluse?'

'Tried that,' said Henry. 'Doesn't work.'

'Even if you say you're an intensely private person?'

'You've got to turn up to say you're a private person. Otherwise they just forget you exist.'

'So you always accept. Like now.'

'Have to. Besides, I don't want to alienate my readers.'

'You still have some?'

'Of course I do.'

'I thought literary fiction was dead.'

'Don't believe what you read in the papers,' said Henry.

'Even the interviews you give?'

'Got to say something,' said Henry. 'Give them enough words to justify running your photograph.'

'And that's what you want? Your photograph in the press.'

'If it sells books.'

'And does it?'

'Who knows?' Henry asked. Who indeed?

'Go for it,' said Pawley. 'Just because you think festivals are pernicious doesn't mean you can't make use of them. Like the university. Use their structures to bring them down. Take the chance to say the unsayable. If they don't like it they won't ask you again, which is no bad thing. But if they do ask you, take it.'

'Take what?' said Henry. 'The bait?'

'Could be, of course. Could be they're setting you up. So what the hell? If they're setting you up they've already got you in their sights. They'll bring you down anyway. So give them what they want. What they don't want. Some radical thoughts that'll mean they'll never pester you again. Strike a blow for freedom. It's a venue. They give you an arena, so take it.'

'An arena?' said Henry apprehensively. 'Like the Colosseum?'

'Why not?' Pawley encouraged him. 'Somebody's got to do it.'

'Why has somebody got to do it?'

'Out of human compassion,' said Pawley. 'Keep the lions fed.'

'Has funding for the arts lost its way?' Henry asked rhetorically. 'Is the money assigned to supporting literature misplaced? Is it being frittered away on the irrelevant like Writers' Festivals and Writers' Centres and overseas trips for the chosen few when it should be directed to subsidizing quality publishing? What is the point of instituting mentorships and writers' workshops when the number of serious novels published each year has declined catastrophically, when no major publisher has a poetry list. Why teach people how to write when no one is going to publish them?'

He had their momentary attention with questions. He turned to history and followed it through with answers.

'Originally funding for literature was simple. It meant the subsidization of works deemed uncommercial, works of the *avant garde* and the experimental, of the literary, of quality writing. The support for the publication of books that would otherwise never appear. This was a policy that benefited everyone - the serious writer, the serious reader, the serious publisher, booksellers, librarians and the whole literary culture. Now that has become only a minor part of the funding agenda.

'A fortune is poured into grants to writers - something that benefits only that handful of chosen individuals. How many of them produce anything really worthwhile? How many of them have been living off the taxpayers' money now for decades? How many have private incomes and significant share portfolios? Why are these grants not means-tested? Why, indeed, do these writers not go out and get a job? In an age of flexible employment, of the governmental institutionalization of part-time work, it has never been easier to get the sort of job that would allow time to write.

'We now have a situation in which the universities offer creative writing courses to 190,000 students a year. But who will ever publish their work? What is the point of encouraging young writers with these programs, with Writers' Centres, with mentorships, when the global media conglomerates are no longer interested in publishing literary fiction or poetry?

'Why, in the course of their thirty something years, have the arts funding bureaucracies failed to address the problem of distribution? Why has no national independent distribution for independent publishers, for small presses, for the self-published, ever been established? A

fortune has been spent on management consultants and feasibility studies, a fortune that could have supplied more than adequate seed-funding.

'Have the funding bodies lost their way? Or is this indeed their way, the way the government and big business want it, degradation and demoralization, the destruction of a proud literary tradition, the cultural equivalent of the destruction of Yugoslavia and Afghanistan and Iraq?'

'What do you think you're doing, Henry?' the Director fumed as the applause died down. It died down pretty rapidly and the Director attacked him with no less speed.

'Are you trying to get us closed down? Are you out of your mind?'

'A bit jolly, I concede,' Henry agreed. 'But it's classic strategy. Bite the hand that feeds you.'

'I could kill you,' she said.

'No need,' said Pawley. 'He's already committed public suicide.'

Henry poured himself a generous glass of Hunter Valley shiraz.

'Here's to debate!' he said, raising it and beaming round genially. His heart rate was up, considerably in fact, he was flushed in the face and sweating profusely at the arm pits. But it was all in a good cause.

'I felt the issues needed to be raised. Open discussion never hurt.'

'There won't be any discussion, open or closed,' said Pawley. 'Just the usual great wall of silence.'

'I'll publish the text in the magazine,' said Henry.

'You will not,' said the Director.

'I'll use it in my column.'

'There won't be any more columns,' she said firmly.

'Why not?'

'Because if the Ministry doesn't close us down first, I shall close you down personally.'

'You can't do that.'

'I can and I will,' she assured him.

'I am the Chair,' said Henry. 'You take direction from me.'

'I am the editor,' she said. 'And as for being Chair, your term has run out.'

'Not yet.'

'Effectively from now,' she said.

'I don't think you can do that.'

'You'll see,' she said.

'Can she do that?' Henry asked Pawley.

'Vote of censure. Dissent from the Chair. If all else fails she can get the Criminal to put you out of action.'

'She wouldn't,' said Henry, aghast.

'Not a shred of doubt,' said Pawley. 'It just depends whether she gets to you first or the Council send in their counsellors. Compulsory counselling, Henry. Banged away in the grounds of the Writers' Clinic. Electric shock to the frontal lobes and genitals in one of the hospital buildings. Retraining in one of the Council's professional development courses.'

'Never,' said Henry.

'I shall personally ensure it,' said the Director.

The wait-people came round with pudding. Chocolate mousse or chocolate mousse. The hubbub subsided as the chattering classes wrapped it round their teeth and tongues.

'I can't think what possessed you,' the Director persisted.

'Just a few ideas I'd knocked around with Pawley.'

'You!' she said, turning to Pawley. 'Did you put him up to it?'

'I wouldn't say put him up to it.'

'So what would you say?'

'They're just the sort of things we toss around over lunch.'

'Lunch!' she said, 'there won't be any more lunches. This is your last supper, you two.'

'It is the duty of the public intellectual to speak out,' said Henry.

'Public intellectual!' she choked, fragments of mousse scattering like fire from a US remote control drone massacring innocents. 'As far as I'm concerned, Henry, you're a public enemy. Public Enemy number one. And you,' she turned to Pawley, 'are no better.'

'Number two?' he asked sweetly, savouring the mousse.

It was when he was half-way through the chocolate mousse and pretty well at the end of the Hunter Valley shiraz that Henry began to feel strange. A hot flush enveloped him. He tried thinking of it as the Director habitually described it, a power surge. But it didn't help. Mind was losing out over matter. Matter was swirling around his stomach and indicating it was unhappy to stay there. A general dizziness prevailed.

He turned to his wife and said, as *sotto voce* as he could and yet still be heard, that he wanted to leave.

'You can't leave yet,' she said.

'Yes, I can,' he said. 'Just help me out of here.'

'Help you?'

'I don't feel very good,' he said.

'Are you all right?'

'Not really.'

He might have made it out alone. But there again, as dizziness enveloped his head, he might not. He didn't want to sway and trip and fall flat on his face like old Blokey O'Kee did every year. Blokey would be mortified, crawling in from the backwoods and having his one party trick trumped. Falling flat on his face was the only thing anyone remembered Blokey for any more, his books, if indeed he had ever written any, having faded from view long ago.

'Just give me a hand,' Henry said.

All might have been well if his wife's politeness had not prevailed. She felt impelled to apologize for their early departure, saying goodnight and all the rest of it. By the time Henry had got to his feet and held onto the back of his chair, the entire table seemed to be focussed on his swaying form, his death-like pallor, his grim reaper expression as he clenched his teeth to stop the vomit gushing out.

His wife steered him to the toilets and he escaped inside. He pissed away gallons of the vile red stuff they had served, evacuated his bowels of the hormone-laced factory-farmed tortured and slaughtered multiple breasted chicken and its gluten and cholesterol saturated sauce.

Through the door he could hear Tuscan Bayes' tremulous falsetto asking if he shouldn't go in and administer the kiss of life.

Henry clenched his teeth.

'I'm fine,' he called out. 'I'll be out in a moment.'

'He says he's fine,' said Pawley, 'but you can never be sure in these cases.'

'I think I should go in,' said Tuscan.

'No,' Henry called out. 'I'll be all right. Just give me a couple of minutes.'

'What's he doing in there?' the Director demanded.

Tuscan giggled suggestively.

Henry raised himself to his feet, splashed water over his face, held on firmly to the hand basin and avoided looking in the mirror. The hot flushes alternated with cold tremors. His teeth began to chatter.

Oh, the indignities of ageing, he reflected. Once you are perceived as old, people start to fuss if you suddenly go dizzy or pass out. Yet it used to happen all the time in the seventies. Let alone the sixties. Always three or four people passed out at any half-decent party. Mix grass and booze, it never failed. Asking for trouble, looking back on it. But nothing serious. All he needed was a quiet lie down, but he didn't see how he was going to manage that here. Served him right for accepting the invitation. Nothing good ever came out of official functions like this. Maybe a quick drive over the Harbour Bridge with the windows open would do the trick.

And it wasn't just a matter of age. His age. It was a matter of The Age. The nature of the times. The way things had become. The sad decline from the good years, when people would pass joints to perfect strangers in restaurants, when excess was the norm and everybody was having a good time. He found it sad, the way society had changed.

'I'm all right,' he said, emerging into the crowd assembled at the toilet door. More embarrassment.

'Are you all right?' the Director demanded.

'Fine,' said Henry. 'Just having a piss.'

'You look terrible,' said Tuscan Bayes.

'Poisoning,' said Pawley.

'Rubbish,' said the Director. 'No one else is ill. How can it be food poisoning?'

'Not food poisoning,' said Pawley darkly. 'Someone must have slipped something in his drink. Like that human rights lawyer on that Indonesian aircraft. Or radiation poisoning like that Russian ex-spy. You should go to emergency straight away, Henry. I told you, you can't say the sort of things you said with impunity. I warned you they'd try to poison you.'

'The only person who poisoned me is you,' said Henry.

'Me!' said Pawley.

'Those hash cookies.'

'What hash cookies?' the Director demanded. 'I didn't see any.'

'Pawley baked a batch.'

'What hash cookies?' the Director demanded of Pawley.

'You know I can't smoke anymore,' said Pawley. 'After the heart attack. So I baked some hash cookies. I offered some to Henry.'

'Henry!' said the Director. 'You didn't!'

'Had to have something to get through the evening. Would've passed out from boredom otherwise.'

'You did pass out,' said his wife.

'Not quite.'

'Near enough.'

'How many did you give him?' the Director demanded of Pawley.

'Just a couple.'

'So where's the other one?'

'I ate it,' said Henry.

'You ate them both?' she said. 'You pig.'

'Well, the first one wasn't having any effect.'

'You have to give them time,' said Pawley. 'Depends how full your stomach is. You should drink some hot tea. That helps potentiate them.'

'There wasn't any tea,' said Henry. 'So I took the second one.'

'And you didn't tell me?' said the Director. 'You could have shared it.'

'Well,' said Henry, 'I didn't like to, you know, you're in a responsible position and all that.'

'So are you,' she said. 'Or were.'

'I was just thinking of your interests.'

'Typical patriarchal authoritarian male behaviour,' she said. 'Anyway, I don't believe you for a moment. You were just greedy. You're a pig, Henry.'

'It's very difficult,' said Henry, 'these days. One is terrified of causing offence. Even offensive looking is an offence at university now.'

'Sharing drugs isn't an offence.'

'It is as far as the courts are concerned. Supply and all that.'

'I wouldn't have dobbed you in.'

'Thank you.'

'Though I might now,' she said. 'Condescending to women. Trying to keep drugs as a male preserve.'

'Did you want one?' Pawley asked.

'Of course.'

They went off in a huddle away from the toilet door.

'You've got to learn to act your age,' Henry's wife said.

'It's these Hunter River reds,' said Henry. 'They're full of histamines.'

'Don't drink so much of them,' she said.

'I know,' said Henry.

He held onto her shoulder as she led his faltering steps, like some ancient survivor of a vanished age, blind Samson, or some stoned victim of the Gorgon.

'Well!' said Tuscan Bayes, watching them pass, hitting the higher registers in the extremity of delight.

Blokey O'Kee raised himself up on his crutches, tugging at what looked suspiciously like a dog collar at his throat, propelling pencil behind his ear, notebook damp in his mouth, ready to record all in his bilious diary of *la vie littéraire*. Tuscan Bayes twirled something that looked even more suspiciously like a leather leash around his wrist.

'Nothing to tell,' said the Director, wiping a few crumbs from her lips and chewing rapidly, getting into damage control mode.

'Nothing?' asked Blokey.

Pawley always insisted Blokey kept the diary for *la police des Ecrivains*, that was why he was so tediously tenacious.

Killer Kilkenny padded across, a glass of Guinness in hand.

'Been overdoing the vodka again down at the Soviet collective?' he asked. 'You should stick to honest Christian stuff.'

'Certainly seems to stick to you,' said the Director distastefully, mopping off a few brown drops from his black-shirted paunch.

'Missing the Moscow gold these days?' he said cheerfully. 'Having to suck on the government teat now, are we?'

'Takes one to spot one,' she said. 'You want a knee in the balls?'

'Wearing my protector,' he said. 'Never go out without it in these femmocratic times.'

He turned to Henry genially.

'Not a bad speech,' he said. 'Some good points there.'

Henry felt a renewed surge of discomfort. Was this what it had come to? Support from the far right?

'Take me home,' he begged his wife. 'I have to get out of here.'

'You certainly do,' said the Director.

He felt nothing but alarm at Killer's approval. It was different for someone like Pawley. Pawley had moved so far to the left and Killer so far to the right that once in a while they bumped into each other, finding themselves in agreement on some issues. It didn't seem to worry either of them. It was not clear that anything ever worried Killer. Or Pawley. Guinness and dope seemed to screen them from all anxieties.

But Henry was certainly worried. He did not want to be that far out, right or left. He just wanted to be. To speak the truth as he saw it. To be recognized for honesty, plain-speaking, integrity.

The derisive mirth of Pawley and Killer rang out. He wasn't sure if it was in the hall or in his head. He wasn't sure whether he had spoken aloud or they were both telepathic. Illusion or reality, to cite one of Pawley's oft-cited grand narratives. He felt a hot flush surging up again.

'Dithering old men,' said the Director, leaving it open as to which of them she referred, Blokey or Tusk or Killer or Henry or the lot of them. 'They can't stand the pace any more. Can't

handle drugs. Can't handle life. It's a woman's world, at last. A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.'

She knew Blokey wouldn't write that down. She'd said it before and it always worked, freezing the lead in his pencil.

Tusk took Blokey by the arm and pointed him back inside, whispering sweet malice in his hairy ear as they shuffled on their way past Henry.

Henry looked at them malevolently. It would only take a quick kick of a leg, de-stabilize one of the crutches, and then -

There was a crash of breaking plates and glass as one of Blokey's crutches suddenly slid sideways and caught up with Tuscan's elevator heels and they both fell onto one of the tables before dropping flat on the floor, Blokey's regular and by now over-familiar party trick, the only one in his pack.

Henry slipped smartly away.

‘Did you do that?’ Henry’s wife demanded.

‘Me? Do what?’

‘Trip them up.’

‘Me?’

‘You.’

‘The thought did pass my mind, but as it happened, it just happened. As it were, he added.’

‘You willed it to happen.’

Henry smiled, enigmatically.

27: Clean up

'If I don't have a holiday soon I shall crack up,' said the Director. Her desk bowed beneath the weight of unread magazines, unfiled correspondence, the less than state of the art computer, and the branches of blossoms ripped off the native flora in the grounds by her pommel-hatted volunteer.

'Take pre-emptive measures,' said Henry. 'Take a break before you crack.'

'I can't afford to,' she said.

'Take a free trip,' said Henry. The usual solution.

'What free trip?'

'There's always somewhere,' said Henry. 'I'm always getting asked to go some place or other I don't want to go to. I don't want to go anywhere. You go instead.'

'Where?'

'Oh, I don't know. China. India. The East.'

'How can I do that?' she snapped.

'Easy. Say your chairman has prior commitments but he has nominated you to represent him.'

'How can I say that? You'd have to tell them.'

'You write the letter and I'll sign it,' he said.

'Henry -.'

'I'll dictate it,' he said. 'Get some paper and do it now.'

He was working on developing the imperious authority of a *Fortune* 500 CEO. Always someone to take dictation. Always someone who could sign for him.

'You know my signature. You've forged it before.'

'Yes, but -.'

'So what's the problem?'

'But I'm not a writer,' she said.

'So what? Anyway, you are something much more important than a writer.'

'I am woman,' she suggested.

'I was going to say you're the Director of a Writers' Centre. A bureaucrat. But even better, a Woman Director. Export the advancement of women bureaucrats to these benighted nations. Show these patriarchal primitives a thing or two.'

'Are you sure you don't want to go yourself? If they're so patriarchal you might feel more at home there than here.'

'Possibly,' he agreed. Wherever there might be. He pondered a moment or two. She had a point. But what it involved - . He didn't want to judge any more competitions, receive the keys of the city, deliver public lectures, open book-exhibitions. He didn't want to go to writers' festivals. He didn't want to travel to hot, tropical places. Or cold intemperate zones. Alcohol prohibitively expensive. Arrested for trying to buy drugs. Entrapped by some manipulative female person. No, he didn't want to travel, full stop. He could no longer face flying. It wasn't Islamic terrorism that worried him, but capitalist institutional practice. The cramped seats. The oxygen deprived air. All those cost-cutting ways of inducing deep vein thrombosis. The heart attack in mid-air. The emergency landing at some remote airstrip.

'No, I'm sure,' he said. 'You go.'

'As what?' she said.

'As what?'

'How can I go as a writer?'

'I'll write you something, if you want.'

She didn't.

'So don't go as a writer. Like I said, you're something much more important than a writer. Something much more in tune with what the age requires.'

'What, Henry?'

'An arts administrator, of course.'

'Of course.'

'You will be able to talk to other arts administrators.'

'That's a point.'

'You will be fêted.'

'You think?'

'Endless banquets. All those exotic foods you like. Eating endangered species.'

'I don't know about that.'

'Think of all those visitors we've entertained here. They'll be only too eager to reciprocate.'

'You think so?'

'That last lot of Chinese.'

'They were hardly here. They refused to give any talks.'

'They didn't speak English.'

'They rushed off to the Gold Coast to gamble at the Casino.'

'There you are then. You won't have to talk either. They'll take you gambling.'

'I don't want to gamble.'

'You'd be a star,' he said. 'The star of the East. The dawn is red. Let a thousand flowers bloom.'

She smiled reflectively.

'It might be fun,' she said.

'Fun!' said Henry. 'It will be an enriching cultural experience. Hands across the ocean. International co-operation and goodwill.'

'Let me write that down,' she said. 'For the annual report.'

Henry repeated it, slowly, with embellishments. Everything except the fun. No need to disturb the Ministry by mentioning fun.

She delegated Henry to keep an eye on the office. Drop in once in a while and see no one was malingering. He didn't have to do anything. The last thing she wanted, indeed, was Henry doing anything.

'Just leave the letters for when I get back. I've put an automatic out-of-office response on the email so you don't have to answer anything.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure, Henry. Just leave everything alone.'

'But pop in now and then.'

'That's it.'

'What if anything urgent crops up?'

'Phone me. You've got my mobile number.'

'Phone you over there?'

'Yes, Henry, phone me over there. That's what phones are for.'

'Really? I thought they were for taking photographs. Are you sure it will work over there?'

'Yes, Henry, I'm sure. I'll give you a call every so often.'

'There's no need,' he said.

'Let me be the judge of that.'

He shrugged.

'Just carry the office mobile with you and keep it switched on so I can always find you.'

'I don't think that will be necessary.'

'Just do it, Henry.'

'Has she gone?' the Criminal asked.

'She's gone.'

'You're sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'You took her to the airport? You saw her get on the plane?'

'No, but -.'

'So how are you sure?'

'She phoned me from the airport.'

'How do you know it was the airport?'

'I could hear them calling flight departures in the background.'

'Maybe,' said the Criminal dubiously. 'What if she didn't get on? What if she missed the flight?'

'Well, she's not here, is she?' said Henry.

The Criminal looked round the office warily.

'Not in this room, anyway,' he conceded.

'You want to check the rest of the building?'

'If that's all right with you,' he said. 'I'd feel easier about it.'

They did a tour of the function rooms together. A bridge tournament in progress in one of them. A poker game in the library. All very resourceful. ‘Revenue raising,’ the Criminal explained. ‘All kosher. Just a few mates.’ The Director was nowhere to be seen.

They stood in the foyer. The Criminal gazed at it with unconcealed distaste.

'We should clean this place out,' he said.

'Clean it out?' Henry asked. 'How do you mean, exactly?'

'Clean it up, you know. Throw some of the junk out.'

'The junk?'

'All this broken-down old furniture, you know. Stuff that's cluttering up the place. It's all crap really.'

'I don't know,' said Henry. 'It's not cheap to hire a skip.'

Fiscal responsibility. The key to good management. It was the key to the broken-down furniture, too. It had all come free.

'Don't need a skip,' said the Criminal. 'All crims, that waste disposal racket. But I know someone who's got a truck, Henry. Mate's rates. Won't cost hardly anything.'

'Is it big enough?'

'Sure, Henry. A covered van. Nobody sees anything. Won't get wet or anything.'

'It won't matter if it does if it's being thrown out.'

'Messy, though,' said the Criminal. 'You know what I mean. Don't want it sitting out there getting soggy. He'll just bring the van round the back, and we'll load it up. Straight in, straight out. Won't take any time at all.'

'You reckon.'

'Yeah. I mean, look at it all.'

He gestured at the entrance hallway, the broken-down rattan chairs, the old couch that sagged, the scratched and stained malevolent old coffee table that grazed anyone's shins who passed too close.

'No one ever uses these. They'd break their back if they did. Sit down on one of them and you'd never get up again.'

The Criminal kicked an antique construction, shaped like a bookcase, but with shelves too close together to accommodate books.

'Useless,' he said. 'If it was any use it would be in the library. So why don't we just toss it out?'

'I think she likes it there for books people bring in to give away.'

'Can't fit them in though, can you?'

'You can lay them down flat.'

'Ridiculous,' said the Criminal. 'Just leave them in a box. People bring in a box of their rotten old books they're throwing away, so why not just leave them in the box? Let people who want them bend over and get them. Waste of effort taking them out. Get rid of this monstrosity and we won't be wasting time unpacking old books. Get on with some real work. Always something to do. Time and motion, Henry.'

'Fair enough,' said Henry.

'So we get rid of all this lot. Those old chairs. The couch. The lot. Right?'

Henry was still uncertain.

'I think they're gifts from members.'

'Sure they are,' said the Criminal. 'They're just getting rid of their old rubbish. Cheap bastards. You have to pay to take it to the tip.'

'So do we have to pay this mate of yours?'

'No, he'll do it as a favour. Don't worry about that, Henry. Like I said, mates' rates. Hardly cost anything.'

Henry looked again at the faded cushions, the ill-assorted drapes covering the threadbare upholstery.

'Puts people off,' said the Criminal.

They went outside onto the veranda. More rickety chairs.

'Rip your clothes on the nails sticking out,' said the Criminal. 'Scratch yourself and you'd be lucky not to get tetanus. Blood poisoning at the very least.'

'Her argument is if we put good chairs out here they'd get stolen.'

'Well, they would, wouldn't they?' the Criminal agreed. 'No one would want to steal this rubbish.'

'Still, they're useful to sit on.'

'No, they're not. They're bleeding dangerous and uncomfortable.'

'So where will we sit?'

'We sit in the office, at our desks,' said the Criminal.

'But if we want to sit out here, talk to a visitor.'

'Visitors are just an interruption.'

'I enjoy sitting out here,' said Henry.

'Well, carry out a chair from inside,' said the Criminal. 'Not a world-shattering problem, Henry. They're not heavy. Even you could lift one.'

'What if they got stolen?'

'Well, they wouldn't, would they, if you carried them back in when you'd finished. Don't leave them out there all night.'

'Fair enough,' said Henry. 'What about chaining them to something?'

'No point,' said the Criminal. 'Snip them loose with bolt-cutters as easily as cutting your toes off.'

Henry flinched.

'I mean, all this old stuff, it spoils the look of the place, doesn't it?'

In a way Henry rather liked it. A certain literary touch. Uncle Silas's decaying estate. Sir Pitt Crawley at Crawley Hall. Castle Rackrent. Dracula in the ruins of Whitby Abbey. Even the chairs that, if you sat on them, you never got out of again, were like those trick chairs of Renaissance drama, chairs that wrapped their arms around you and never let you go. A long time since anyone mentioned any of those once almost canonical plays. Maybe the Director had done a course on Revenge Tragedies back in the canonical past. Maybe Henry had taught it. Who could remember? His memory was like the furniture, fading and broken down.

'Depressing,' said the Criminal. 'Gets you down, day after day. It's bad enough with all the loonies wandering around. Tricky trying to clean them out. But we could get rid of this lot for a start.'

'I suppose so,' said Henry. He was still uncertain.

'It puts people off.'

That was it, of course. The source of his anxiety.

'Nothing wrong with putting people off,' Henry said.

'Come again,' said the Criminal.

'Discouraging the public from coming out here isn't a bad thing. You don't want members coming in all the time and messing up the photocopier and stuffing up the fax and stealing books from the library and spilling coffee everywhere.'

'It can get pretty boring here if no one comes,' the Criminal said. 'Might as well be back in jail.'

'There'll always be somebody coming in,' said Henry. 'But if you can discourage most of them -.'

'It certainly discourages me,' said the Criminal, kicking the pseudo-bookcase again. 'I know I'd be a lot happier if I didn't have to face this old rubbish every day.'

'Fair enough,' said Henry. 'It's a matter of balance. Office morale versus interruptions.'

'Maybe.'

'That's how it is. The members are supposed to be writers. This is a Writers' Centre. They should be at home writing. Or preferably reading. Buying real writers' books.'

'Like yours.'

'Like mine,' Henry agreed. 'We don't want them coming into the building that often. That's why the site is so good. Inconvenient. Off-putting. The hospital, and all that.'

And it kept away the effete and pretentious and impaired. Tuscan Bayes. Francesca Templar. Blokey O'Kee. Their exquisite and bruised sensibilities vibrated on the same wave-length as the Criminal's.

'You've given this some thought,' said the Criminal.

'We both have,' said Henry, generously.

Unconsciously they found themselves moving back out onto the veranda. The wind scattered the jacaranda blossom across the lawn in a glorious purple. Natural beauty. In comparison the old furniture did have an awful hideousness.

'Still,' said the Criminal, 'we don't have to make things wretched for ourselves just to keep people away, do we? Like shooting yourself in the foot.'

His earring glistened in the sunlight, twisting in the breeze.

'So if we get a couple of new chairs we can put out on the veranda -,' the Criminal suggested. 'Light ones. Easy to lift. And then get rid of the old rubbish -.'

'We should be right,' Henry agreed. 'I'm not going to be able to help shift anything, though. I've got a bad back.'

'I know you have, Henry,' said the Criminal ingratiatingly. 'No heavy lifting for you.'

'We could get some volunteers, I suppose,' Henry said doubtfully. 'But we'd have to make sure it wasn't the same people who gave us all this stuff in the first place. They'd get really offended. How would we know, though?'

'Don't worry about it, Henry. Just leave it to me. We don't need to involve the members. Volunteers are more trouble than they're worth. By the time you've told them what you want them to do and shown them how to do it and then told them all over again, you might as well have done it yourself. Useless bunch of geriatrics. No offence, Henry, nothing personal. You can't help getting old, just nature's way. But all these old biddies and senile old buffers, they're useless. They totter in and the first thing they do is sit down on the chairs and complain they can't get up again, they've all got bad backs. No offence, Henry, but you know what I mean. Sit

around all morning cluttering the place up. But if they've got nowhere to sit, they won't be coming in any more, will they? How about that?'

'Then we won't have any volunteers at all.'

'Get the young ones,' said the Criminal. 'The way it is now they get put off seeing all these sick old folks. Like a knacker's yard. But keep the old codgers away, then the young will come in. Simple, innit? Natural selection. Survival of the fittest.'

'I'm not sure the Director will like it.'

'Yes, she will, Henry. You know how she goes on about dithering old men. We'll get her some vibrating young ones. Get the job done in half the time. She'll come round. In the end. She always does.'

'Does she?'

'Mostly.'

'What if she wants to replace it all when she gets back? We might end up with even tattier stuff.'

The Criminal shuddered, his aesthetic sensibilities suffering.

'No way. Anyway, it'll take time. I mightn't be here. With a bit of luck.'

'Unless she bangs you back in jail for getting rid of this lot.'

'I'm already in jail.'

'But with no day-release privileges.'

'I told you, it's like a jail here, why would I mind?'

'What if she decides to buy new stuff?' Henry persisted, going through all the options. 'Then we'll have ugly utilitarian chairs and the volunteers and visitors will come and sit on them.'

'Won't be able to afford it,' said the Criminal. 'I've seen the books.'

'The books?' said Henry. The mention of books always livened him up.

'The finances.'

'Oh, those books.'

'Yeah, those books. The real ones. No way she can afford new chairs. No, Henry, throw this lot out and we're safe. Nowhere to sit down, no visual pollution, just a couple of light chairs to take out to the veranda. Suits me, suits you, perfect.'

'I suppose so.'

'It's a deal, then?'

'It's a deal.'

Even as they shook hands an anonymous white Ford Transit van drove into the car park.

'So go off and get yourself a long lunch, Henry. Bring me the receipt and I'll fix you up for it. And by the time you're finished, this lot will be done.'

'You don't need any help?' Henry asked, insincerely, but you had to ask.

The Criminal was an expert in insincerity.

'No mate, no worries. Watch your back and have a good lunch. Enjoy, as they say out there in the world of the free.'

The Director phoned from a barge on the Yangtze. Or perhaps a bandit outpost on the River margin. Or was it a ghat on the Ganges? In the background Henry could hear wailing. It could have been prisoners singing joyful songs as they worked for the greater good of society. Or a traditional opera performed in the Director's honour as a mark of trans-cultural goodwill. Or maybe a malfunctioning interception device monitoring terrorists and unlicensed drug traffickers.

'Is everything all right?' she asked.

'Everything's fine.'

'Are you sure?'

He stood there in the bare, empty precincts, the moth-eaten carpet removed, the broken-down furniture gone for good, his voice echoing around the bare stone walls and stripped cedar floorboards.

'What's that echo?' she said.

'Echo?'

'Yes.'

'Just the nature of international phone transmissions,' he said.

'I've never heard it before.'

'Never heard it before?' said Henry, airport novelist. 'Oh, I have.'

'So is everything all right?'

'Everything all right? Perfect.'

'What's been happening?'

'Happening? Nothing,' he said. 'Everything's fine.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing much. Well, the usual. Everything's on track.'

She said something he couldn't catch.

'I think you're breaking up,' he said.

'No, I'm not,' she came back loud and clear.

'No you're not. Do you want to talk to the Criminal?' Henry asked.

'Is he there?'

'There? Oh, yes, he's here. Every day.'

'Get him.'

'Get him. Your word is my command,' said Henry, passing the phone across like pass the parcel or postman's knock.

The Criminal took it and listened dutifully.

'Perfect,' he said. 'Everything's fine. Echo? What echo? Sorry, I think you're breaking up.'

He dropped the phone from his shaking hands. He picked it up at arm's length and switched it off.

'Might just step outside for a smoke, Henry,' he said.

They went out to the veranda. The jacaranda scattered its petals like peach blossom in an oriental art work. They watched it. There were no chairs to sit on, so they stood there, letting the breeze dry the sweat from their brows.

'She'll come round,' said the Criminal. 'In the end.'

'Yes,' agreed Henry. 'You said she always does.'

'Usually,' said the Criminal. 'I might have been exaggerating a bit. But yes, Henry, usually she does.' He took a drag on his cigarette. 'Let's hope so, anyway.'

28: Henry's Novel

Despite all the careful financial planning, Henry was finding funds tight now that he was a free man in the free world, unencumbered by employment. Together with Dr Bee and Pawley, he had spent many a lunch looking into early retirement. A major collaborative research project over an

eighteen month period. Two years, even. Checking the figures. Double checking. Phoning up the superannuation fund. Meeting advisers. Comparing notes. It had all sounded good, but now it wasn't as good as it had sounded.

He examined his options. Take a teaching position somewhere. Offer a creative writing class. He felt sick at the very idea. Even with travel thrown in. North America. The third world. His stomach wrenched, intimations of reflux, a fever of anxiety.

'Have a tablet,' Dr Bee offered generously. He took a packet of pills from his pocket.

Pawley produced a cookie wrapped in aluminium foil.

Henry declined both and poured himself a glass of red wine.

'Even talking about not doing it makes me ill,' he said.

'The way the mind works,' Pawley explained. 'It disregards positive and negatives. It just registers "teaching" and goes into spasm. Trauma. Shut-down.'

Dr Bee took the pill himself.

'Lest your symptoms prove contagious,' he told Henry.

'The only other thing I can think of is applying for a grant,' Henry said.

'You've changed your tune,' said Dr Bee. 'After all those years of inveighing against writers' fellowships.'

'It wasn't worth it when I was teaching,' said Henry. 'Didn't anywhere near match my salary. I tried it one year, cost me a fortune.'

'So,' said Pawley, 'the age of compromise. Welcome to the world of self-censorship.'

'Not necessarily,' said Henry.

'Inevitably,' said Pawley. 'You soften your position. No social criticism. No political angle. You refashion yourself as a safe grant recipient. And it all serves the interests of control. Suppress dissent. Induce complicity.'

'I am not without integrity,' said Henry, since no one else was going to say it for him.

'There's still time to change,' said Dr Bee. 'Despite all those years of denunciation.'

'So what if you contradict yourself,' said Pawley.

'You contain multitudes,' said Dr Bee.

'Multitudes of books,' said Henry. 'Certainly.'

'Just contain them,' said Dr Bee.

'I'm going to need a letter of support,' said Henry.

'Shouldn't be too hard to fake,' said Dr Bee. 'Use your skills. If you can't come up with something like that, what hope have you as a creative writer?'

'They require an independent assessment.'

'Just put yourself in the mind-set of another character,' Dr Bee recommended. 'Pretend you're writing fiction. In fact you wouldn't have to pretend. It would be fiction.'

'I'd rather get someone else to do it.'

'Wouldn't we all,' said Dr Bee. 'As for living, our servants can do that for us.'

'Couldn't you write something?'

'Would I have to read something?'

'Well -'

'Just Henry's novel and the Council's two hundred page manual of instructions for funding applications,' said Pawley. 'It would fill up your insomniac nights. Might turn out to be a cure.'

'What would you want me to say?'

'Whatever you felt,' said Henry.

'How can I know if you won't tell me? You don't expect me to read one of your manuscripts?'

'Well, yes.'

'And the manual,' Pawley reminded them.

'That would be two books to read.'

'Is that too much to ask?'

'Yes,' said Dr Bee.

'From a former academic in English Literature?'

'Absolutely.'

'All right,' said Henry. 'I can draft it for you. All you'd have to do is send it from your email.'

'I don't have email,' said Dr Bee.

Henry turned to Pawley.

'Computer's stuffed. In at the vet's.

'I'll print it out,' said Henry. 'All you need to do is sign it and fax it.'

'No fax,' said Dr Bee.

'Use the department fax.'

'Then I'd have to go back in there. No way.'

'I'll give you a stamped addressed envelope,' said Henry.

'Why do you need us?' Pawley asked. 'Why not just do it yourself?'

'They ask for an independent assessment.'

'Still -,' said Pawley. 'Do you have a copy of it here?'

Henry did his diffident act.

'Cough it up,' Dr Bee instructed.

Henry reached into his briefcase and produced a couple of sheets of A4, giving one to each of them.

'Sounds like a work of genius,' said Dr Bee, scanning the sheet.

Henry smiled modestly

Pawley held it out at arm's length and peered at it. 'What's it actually for? he asked.

'For money, clearly,' said Dr Bee.

'But is it an application for a fellowship? Or for a publication subsidy? Or self-publication? Are your resorting to self-publishing, Henry?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Not yet, anyway,' Pawley interpreted. 'Though it reads like it could be.'

'It's sort of flexible.'

'Like employment these days,' said Pawley. 'Contemporary double-speak for job insecurity.'

'I'm keeping my options open,' said Henry. 'I don't want to be troubling you all the time.'

'No trouble,' said Dr Bee. 'You don't need to worry about that. You'll be the first to hear if it's trouble.'

'Exactly,' said Henry. 'So I thought a multi-purpose letter.'

'Multi-skilling,' said Pawley. 'As we call it now.'

'Something like that.'

'So we could be signing anything,' said Dr Bee. 'You could be asking for a grant, travel money, publication subsidy, bank loan, second mortgage, troubled assets relief program, any of it.'

Henry nodded.

'What's it worth?' Pawley asked.

Henry looked offended.

Pawley picked up the empty bottle and waved it in the air.

'You want me to order another bottle?' Henry asked.

The waiter was already approaching.

'Yes,' Pawley agreed.

'And pay for it,' Dr Bee added.

'And then you'll sign?'

'Let's see what you order first,' said Dr Bee.

'Something good,' said Pawley. 'Don't be cheap. Something worthy of your genius.'

'Something concomitant to your needs,' said Dr Bee. 'And ours, of course. We wouldn't want to come too cheaply and undermine our credibility.'

'Just imagine you're British Aerospace selling to Saudi Arabia,' said Pawley. 'A man's got to do what a man's got to do.'

'Put up or shut up,' Dr Bee elaborated. 'Think yourself lucky we're not in one of those downtown restaurants with $1,000 bottles of wine beloved by bankers and brokers in the bad old days.'

'We could go to one,' Pawley offered.

Henry took his manuscript from his briefcase. He held it out to Dr Bee who made no move to take it. Indeed, he folded his arm determinedly as if it might have had a hex embedded in it, or be contaminated with polonium 123. Pawley similarly failed to reach out eagerly, occupied himself with scratching, searching for ticks and leaches no doubt from his rural hide-away.

'What's that you've got there, Henry?' he asked.

'The novel.'

'The novel? By whom?'

'Mine of course.'

'Which one?'

'The one I'm applying for funds for.'

'You've already written it?'

'Most of it.'

‘Completed?’ said Dr Bee.

‘Well, not fully.

‘Open ended,’ suggested Pawley.

‘Something like that,’ Henry agreed.

‘Still a way to go.’

‘Could be.’

‘You’re not sure?’

‘It depends,’ said Henry.’

‘On whether you get funding?’

‘Well –,’ said Henry.

'So why do you need funds to write it, if it’s completed?' Dr Bee asked.

‘It’s not quite completed,’ said Henry. ‘But you always do it that way. Standard institutional practice. Or at least it used to be. In the university.'

'What was?'

'Having the project completed before you applied for funding. That way you knew it would work out. You knew you had something to say. And it could be said. You'd already said it.'

'So what are the funds for?'

'For the next project.'

'And what was the point of this elaborate chicanery?' Dr Bee asked.

'Well, to make sure you produced something with the grant. If you'd already written it, then you would be sure you could produce something.'

'Does anyone care?'

'In those days, yes. It was easier to get another grant if you'd got something to show for the previous one.

'But not now.'

'Not now, no. Now the whole point lies in getting the million dollar grants. Shows you're important. No matter if you never produce any results.'

'But arts funding is not like this?' Dr Bee asked.

'I don't really know.'

'You do, but you're in denial,' said Pawley.

'And you expect us to support your request for a million dollars?'

'Nothing like that amount,' said Henry.

'Why not?' Dr Bee asked.

'If you're going to do it, do it big,' said Pawley.

'Of course,' said Pawley, 'you could be really despicable and apply to do a doctorate in creative writing and then get a university scholarship.'

'Become a graduate student again,' said Dr Bee, discouragingly.

'I never was a graduate student,' said Henry.

'Well, there you are, then. Finally get yourself an unnecessary qualification in the twilight of your years. Assuming you complete, that is.'

'Get yourself some money, too,' said Pawley.

'Take the scholarship that might have gone to someone more deserving. Some struggling poor young student,' said Dr Bee with uncharacteristic concern for the poor and young. ‘Part of the middle-class welfare program.’

Henry pondered. It was not that he was undeserving, after all. But then there was the issue of going back onto campus. Being supervised. Compulsory seminars, probably. Maybe there was somewhere he could do it by distance education. Send in his drafts by email. Get the scholarship paid by electronic fund transfer. No harm in looking into it.

How different was the Writers' Centre. How different the Director's response. None of that ingrained academic negativity.

'Of course, Henry,' she said. 'Any time. What do you want me to say?'

'Well -' he hesitated.

'Modesty forbids?'

'Well -'

'You need the money, is that it?'

'Well, yes.'

'You could teach a workshop. Do some mentoring.'

'I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you.'

'It's not all the same,' the Director assured him.

'Still -'

'That novel of yours,' the Director said.

'Yes?' said Henry. 'You read it?'

'All this material about the Writers' Centre,' she said.

'Ah, yes,' said Henry, tentatively.

'Just remind me never to tell you anything about things here ever again.'

'Really?' he said.

'I don't want confidential business turning up in your fiction.'

'No one will believe it,' Henry assured her.

'I'll be the judge of that,' she said. 'I'm just not telling you anything ever again.'

'Really?' he said.

'Really.'

No more cash flow crises with phone calls first thing in the morning breaking into his writing, no more crisis management at the weekend, no more staff problems reaching into the night.

'Never again,' she said.

He restrained himself from asking was that a promise. Even if he didn't get the grant, at least some good had come out of his application. Some benefits had already accrued.

'Apart from that,' she said, 'it doesn't have a proper ending.'

He groaned. But inwardly. First up Dr Bee and Pawley complained that the book he wanted funds to write was already completed, and now the Director was complaining it didn’t have a proper ending.

'It's not finished yet. I'm applying for a grant to finish it.'

'You're applying for a grant so you can keep going out to lunch with those dithering old men,' she said.

'Can't not eat. Anyway, if you took me out to lunch more often, I wouldn't have to spend so much time with them, would I?'

'The Centre can't afford you, Henry. That's why I'm supporting your application. However,' she said.

'What do you mean, however?' Henry asked. Sometimes he hated the word.

'I noticed it before in your last book. That didn't have a proper ending, either.'

'Proper ending? What do you mean? You sound like Miss Martha Buskbody.'

'And who might she be?'

'In *Old Mortality*. She complained to Walter Scott that "your plan of omitting a formal conclusion will never do."'

'I just like a good ending,' she said. 'Everything all properly wrapped up.'

'I can't do that,' Henry protested.

'Why not?'

'In a novel about ageing?'

'And arts bureaucracies,' she added.

'The central issues of our time,' he agreed.

'Your time,' she said. 'Such as you have left.'

'That's exactly it,' said Henry. 'Closure would only mean one thing.'

'And what's that?'

'Well, closure. The end. Finis. You know.'

'Death. In a word. Is that what you mean?'

'Well, yes. I didn't want to spell it out.'

'That's a bit depressing,' the Director agreed. 'You need to be more positive. Take exercise. Don't drink so much.'

'I know,' said Henry.

'All I'm suggesting is a proper plot. Properly wound up.'

'In a winding sheet,' said Henry. 'I'm too old for plots. The only plot left is a burial plot.'

This was a theme that did not want closure. That positively resisted closure. Closure was the last thing wanted. Any ending was not to be sought for and best never reached. Best deferred as long as deferral could defer itself. A song without ending. An unfinished symphony. Schubert's eighth. Schubert's seventh and tenth, for that matter. Mahler's tenth. Elgar's third. Mozart's *Requiem*. Puccini's *Turandot*. Berg's *Lulu*. Even Bach's *Art of Fugue*. Old man river, just keeping on rolling. A shelf without book-ends. A bottomless bottle of Chateau Roman. The immortal story. The never-ending novel. To hell with Classical form. In some circumstances post-modern indeterminacy was much more attractive, aesthetically and otherwise. This was one of them.

29: Renascent Men

Henry sat in the Golden Bowl. Alone. Thank Heavens. He enjoyed solitude. It was going to be hard, he knew. But it was worth it.

'House white,' the waiter said. Not a question.

'Mineral water.'

'And a bottle? Small carafe? Are we alone today?'

'We are always alone these days,' said Henry. 'Just the mineral water.'

The waiter made a discreetly sorry face. Sympathy, surprise, solicitude and a subtle suggestion of satire. Even a smirk.

The writers' festival had been the final straw. Henry knew even at the time it was a bad idea. He should never have gone. But there again, who knew but it was for the best?

He had been put on notice after his performance there.

'Either you give up drinking or you give up me,' his wife had said.

He thought about it for a while.

Why not give up both? he asked himself.

'You and Pawley, both,' said Dr Bee.

'Pawley?' Henry asked. 'What's happened to him.'

'Maddy took off in a UFO.'

'Really?'

'I don't know about really,' Dr Bee conceded. 'But so he told me.'

‘And how’s he taking that?’

‘Flying high,’ said Dr Bee.

And so he was. He came in blasted. Wasted. High as a kite and happy with it. No restraints on his consumption of THC, beyond market forces. No more complaints from Maddy that his energy made her ill. No more accusations of bad vibrations. No more accusations of anything.

‘So what now?’ Dr Bee asked.

‘Everything,’ said Pawley.

‘Pretty much,’ Henry agreed. ‘Tomorrow the world.’

‘Why not today?’ Pawley asked.

‘Today, then,’ Henry agreed.

‘Would you like me to lead you round the shopping malls?’ Dr Bee offered. ‘Check out replacement models amongst the available housewives?’

‘Thanks but no thanks,’ said Pawley. ‘Men and women were never meant to live with each other.’

‘Never again,’ said Henry. ‘Couldn’t afford it, anyway. She’s taken all my money.’

‘All?’ Dr Bee inquired.

‘Well, half. Insists it’s her legal right.’

‘They do. It is,’ Pawley agreed. ‘But who needs money when you have freedom?’

‘I find it helps,’ said Dr Bee.

‘Grow your own,’ said Pawley.

‘Money?’

‘Weed. Same thing. Cash crop.’

‘What if you get caught?’

‘Caught? You mean helicopters at crack of dawn? What’s the worst thing that could happen? No money, so they can’t fine me.’

‘Jail?’

‘Still not like marriage,’ said Pawley. ‘At least you can get good drugs in jail.’

‘I suppose you could always teach again,’ Dr Bee said to Henry. ‘Find a new child bride on campus.’

‘Never,’ said Henry.

‘I take it that is not just a refusal to teach,’ said Dr Bee.

‘History shows that writers probably shouldn’t have wives, anyway,’ said Henry. ‘Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Shelley, Bulwer Lytton, T. S. Eliot, Scott Fitzgerald.’

‘Hemingway be your guide,’ said Dr Bee.

‘Bullfighting? Game-fishing? Suicide?’

‘Men without Women,’ said Dr Bee.

‘Teaching was only part of the problem,’ said Pawley. ‘All those years in the university meant we had become institutionalized. Along with the pressure of all the other institutions: marriage, mistresses, the writers’ union. We grew dependent. We felt we needed props. We hung onto the structures. But we don’t need any of them. Escape from the mind prison.’

‘And this is escape?’ said Dr Bee, looking at them.

Round at the Writers’ Centre all was desolation. The grounds looked more unkempt. More buildings had lost their roofs, more windows were broken, more graffiti had been sprayed, more vicious looking dogs were being trained, aircraft flew lower on their missions of destruction.

Inside the building itself a deathly quiet held sway. The foyer was bare. No chairs, no couches, no tables, nothing. Henry's footsteps echoed hollowly. In the office the Director sat at her desk amidst fallen leaves and faded blossoms.

'Where's the Criminal?'

'Gone,' she said.

'Gone?'

'Early release. The prisons are overcrowded.'

Maybe the desolated buildings were the sign of freedom after all. Not destruction but regime change.

'I have to speak to you, Henry,' the Director said.

That tone that women use. But he was liberated now. He had nothing to fear but fear itself.

'Speak,' he said.

'I have had enough,' she said. 'I cannot trust my staff nor rely on the support of my chair.'

'We were only cleaning up,' said Henry.

'Criminality, misogyny, dithering old men, furniture thieves, bureaucracy, stake-holders, writers –.'

'Poets?' Henry suggested.

She disregarded him.

'You're not upset?'

'Upset? Why should I be? Let someone else handle it. I do not need the stress. It is no longer my problem.'

‘So whose is it?’

‘How should I know?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am leaving, Henry.’

The words resonated round the bare building.

I am dying, Egypt, dying.

‘Leaving? Why?’

She maintained a dignified silence.

Remember me.

‘Not because of that, surely,’ said Henry.

‘You be the judge of that.’

‘Well,’ said Henry.

‘Apart from which, we are being evicted.’

‘Evicted.’

‘The Ministry has told us to go.’

‘Where?’

‘They don’t know yet.’

‘Why?’

‘Why, Henry? Because the University is taking over the site.’

‘The University?’

‘The University.’

It was a horrible thought.

‘Why?’

‘It is expanding. It needs new grounds. The Ministry has sold us down the river.’

And now they were tracking him down with baying hounds.

‘The mind prison merges with the mental hospital,’ he reflected. ‘Ah well, a marriage of true minds.’

‘Nothing you can say any longer affects me, Henry. I am sickened to the core.’

‘The invisible worm,’ he offered.

‘You are all too visible, Henry.’

The best he could offer was ‘Cor!’ like a solitary crow with a last straw in its beak.

She carried on cleaning up her desk and ignored him.

‘So what are you going to do?’ he asked.

‘I’ve had an offer I can’t refuse,’ she said.

‘You, too,’ said Henry.

Another pillar of his world collapsed.

And he was still standing. Amidst the wreckage. And still standing.

‘Just write that letter of support for me before you go, would you?’ he said.

‘For your novel? Of course, Henry.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t you want to know what the offer was?’

So the end came suddenly, as ends often do. Maybe it had been coming a long time. Resentments building up that Henry had ignored. UFO training in process and Pawley too blissed out to notice. The University in expansionist mode, the Ministry retrenching. No slow psychological

development in the manner of the grand narratives of the past. None registered, anyway. If you wanted that, you could read nineteenth century novels.

'Ripper,' said Pawley, when Henry told him. 'I was going to leave the committee, anyway. Don't need somewhere to get away to, now I've got the place to myself.'

'That's true,' Henry agreed.

'Great to be single again,' said Pawley.

'Should've done it years ago.' Henry agreed.

'As we used to say about early retirement,' said Pawley.

'So you are now both doubly retired,' said Dr Bee.

'Three fold,' said Henry. 'I shan't be staying on at the Centre.'

'Born again,' said Pawley.

'The world lies all before us,' said Henry.

Renascent men.